



Min-Maxing

My **TRPG**
Build in
Another
World

Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson

5

Author

Schuld

Illustrator

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The Henderson Scale

- 9: Everything is as it should be and everyone enjoys a happy end to end all happy ends.
- 1: The dragon is slain, the princess is saved, and the adventurers raise up a toast at the pub.
- 0: For better or for worse, things go according to the GM and players' plans.
- 0.5: A tangent impacts the main story.
"Wait, what about that task I assigned PC2? What happened to the handout I gave you?"
- 0.75: A minor storyline takes the place of the main plot.
E.g. "No, look at the backstory: as an officer in this shady syndicate, PC2 *has* to convince the newly empowered PC1 to join up. Why the hell would you deliberately taunt him?"
- 1.0: Some fatal mistake prevents the true ending from ever coming to fruition.
E.g. PC2 unabashedly exposes the fact that their syndicate was the one behind the terrorist attack that caused PC1 to awaken to his powers in the first place. "You've gotta be kidding me!"
- 1.25: The GM condemns his players but tries to figure out how to continue in their next session.
E.g. "I told you to recruit him! How the hell are you going to keep the party together!! Huh? You didn't read the damn handout!! What the hell?!"
- 1.5: The party intentionally wipes.
E.g. PC1: "So, er... My character has to lose his shit here, right? Like, my childhood friend is kinda *dead*."
PC3: "And, uh, I know I'm a syndicate goon and all, but I'm sorta on his side for this one, yeah?"
- 1.75: The players commit genocide or otherwise move to bring the setting to its knees. The GM silently shuts his screen.
E.g. "...I didn't prepare PvP for this scenario."
- 2.0: The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.
E.g. The GM packs his things without a word.
- Over:** The realm of gods. Despite experiencing everything from 0.5 to 1.75, the players continue on for whatever reason—and somehow progress the story. After an unknowable amount of time, the characters find some new objective and dutifully complete it.
E.g. "Overtaken with fury, PC1 and PC3 fight back but are quickly outnumbered and overwhelmed. PC3 is taken out back, and PC1 is turned into an experimental sample... You know, I could've sworn I'd said that PC2 was supposed to have doubts about the organization's morals. Tell me: how did it end up like this?"

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Munchkin

1: A childish player who throws fits to try and gain every advantage they can for their PC.

2: A player who prefers to enjoy the act of building up a strong character over fleshing out their place in the world. These players staunchly uphold the rules on their quest for invincibility. Also known as a Japanese munchkin.



Preface

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG)

An analog version of the RPG format utilizing paper rule books and dice.

A form of performance art where the GM (Game Master) and players carve out the details of a story from an initial outline.

The PCs (Player Characters) are born from the details on their character sheets. Each player lives through their PC as they overcome the GM's trials to reach the final ending.

Nowadays, there are countless types of TRPGs, spanning genres that include fantasy, sci-fi, horror, modern chuanqi, shooters, postapocalyptic, and even niche settings such as those based on idols or maids.

Reality tore open. The hole occupied only the bare minimum amount of space, perhaps betraying the fatigue of its creator; it simply hovered above a well-worn hammock in a laboratory belonging to none other than the first heiress to the Stahl barony, Agrippina du Stahl.

The woman herself came slithering through the tear and directly into bed.

“Oh, I’m tired... So tired... What a colossal waste of time...”

The groaning noblewoman had appeared from the shaky portal with all the energy of half-finished pudding: it would fit best to say that she had been excreted out of it. Her tone carried so much palpable fatigue that every word threatened to lift her soul away with it. For someone who avoided social merriment and career advancement alike, her faculty-mandated torture session had been agonizing enough to draw her true feelings into the realm of speech.

Methuselah boasted enough strengths to earn their title as the peak of all humanfolk, to be sure. Their unmatched internals allowed them to forgo food and sleep, and let those who partook in the occasional meal or drink get away without cycling it back out. Making full use of their physical gifts meant that a methuselah was perfectly capable of engaging in high-level debate on magical theory for seasons at a time, much like Agrippina had done.

Alas, the gap between survival and comfort was as profound as it was profoundly callous.

Agrippina liked to sleep several times a week to refresh herself, and even dabbled in the sensory amusement of cuisine when it suited her. Most of all, she loved the luxury of lazily swinging her legs in her hammock.

Unfortunately, her conversational partner had been Duke Martin Werner von Erstreich—he was technically also a great duke, but his continued leadership of House Erstreich made him a duke as well—and the man was the sort of immortal who would happily renounce food and sleep in their entirety for the sake of his research. For a woman whose pastimes consisted of sloth and indolence, he was nothing short of her polar opposite.

Their meeting had illustrated the difference in their priorities perfectly: the scoundrel considered magecraft as a means to further her interests, whereas the duke took it as his interest proper.

For as antisocial and lazy as Agrippina was, she was not stupid enough to allow her lethargy to cause her own ruin. Though her discussion with Duke Martin on the technical details of the aership had run on much too long, she hadn't dared to do him the dishonor of asking for a break or to leave.

Authority was everything in a monarchy. When a sour mood could reduce someone's life to less than a scrap of paper, interrupting a superior's amusement was next to unthinkable; doubly so when the man in question had once reigned as Emperor, and remained one of the College's untouchables to this day.

Had they been in her motherland, Agrippina could have held her own as the first princess to one of the Kingdom's most influential families; yet in the Empire, she was no more than a foreign researcher of incidental noble birth. No matter how prestigious her background was, it meant nothing in the face of someone whose clout overshadowed her own.

Thus she had held out until this very moment, where she could finally dive into the hammock she had so dearly longed for. The pure joy she felt was nothing short of that felt by a lone vagabond returning home after wandering unwelcome for decades.

"Ahh... My beloved laboratory... I shan't so much as step foot outside you ever again...or at least, for the next ten years."

Agrippina's every remark only served to sully the beautiful dress she'd been given for the aership showcase, not to mention how happily she rubbed her face into her soft bedding. Yet even as her brain melted into euphoria, a fleck of lucidity in the back of her mind noticed something was off.

Peeking up with one eye, she surveyed the room. A normal person would have seen only the shining rays of spring sun and been content to say this was closer to a greenhouse meant for tea parties than a

magus's atelier. However, the myriad of invisible lookout spells told a different story.

Every personal lab in the College came with a handful of simple defensive systems already installed. Naturally, Agrippina had torn them all out—there wasn't a single researcher that left them in place—and replaced them with not ten, not twenty, but eighty-seven different barriers that protected her territory from threats both magical and physical.

The methuselah could see them all, and she noticed something strange.

The only traces of entry present in her laboratory belonged to her servant, who had dutifully kept the place tidy, and her student, who had come in to fetch her homework...but that only covered the laboratory *proper*.

Exhaling a spell woven into her breath, Agrippina dragged out the records of those who had passed through one of her many wards. She looked over the archive written in light that glowed only for her; after sorting out those who were expected to come and go, she found that two people had been let into her drawing room.

The first was a friend of her manservant, Erich of Konigstuhl. She recalled having met them once following the gut-bustingly hilarious tome-purchasing episode: they were a College student who had cast their lot with the gloomy hermits.

This was, well, fine. Had the boy brought over a *professor* belonging to another cadre without hesitation, he would be due for much worse than a spanking, but the methuselah felt like she may or may not have given him permission to invite his friends into the parlor, at least. She could have put in the effort to remember the exact date and time at which she'd said that, of course, but this memory was serviceable enough as was.

No, the problem lay with the other guest. Though Agrippina was unacquainted with whom it represented, the family name dancing along at the end was *very* familiar—troublingly so.

The spell that had recorded the entrants was one that exposed their true names unless they explicitly took steps to hide them. Furthermore, this wasn't something flimsy enough to be prevented by an average counterspell or miracle; the formula belonged to Agrippina's father, whose influence invited proportionate animosity. Its readings were certain: after all, even the woman who'd cast the spell had taken 130 years to find an answer to it.

This was psychosorcery that scanned the soul for what it considered its true name. Leaving aside the fact that the caster had waded shoulder-deep in the swamp of forbidden magicks to set up an approximation of a lock, Agrippina had to read and reread the name

over and over again to make sure she was sane.

“Constance Cecilia Valeria Katrine von Erstreich... *What?*”

Alas, no matter how many times she looked the name over, it never changed. It was no fake: a foolish imitator who considered themselves an Erstreich for enough time to believe their fiction at the very crux of their being would not be allowed to draw breath for long.

“What has he *done*?”

Come to think of it, the warning signs had been there. Duke Martin had practically imprisoned her in a single room for months, and she’d sensed people coming to the door on many occasions. Then, at the important showcase, he’d suddenly vanished.

Agrippina had noticed the Emperor’s lividity under his guise of normalcy, suggesting that the duke’s disappearance had not been planned. In fact, the only reason she was here in her room to begin with was because the man had skipped out on his promise to show her around the ship following the terrace banquet.

Some unforeseen emergency must have occurred, and her servant and the girl he’d invited were the cause.

Hauling her dreary body out of bed, Agrippina plodded along to the drawing room. With every step, she cast aside ornaments that could buy common families whole, stripping off her pinching boots and untying her heavy hair to make herself comfortable. By the time she reached the parlor, she’d torn off her tight nightgown to shamelessly lay her body bare.

The room proved its keeper’s commitment to orderliness; without prior knowledge that someone had entered, she would have been none the wiser. Both the low coffee table and the sofa were immaculately kept by her exemplary servant.

Whereas a detective would struggle to find damning evidence, the magus only grew more certain. Divinations like this were at their most precise when physically at the site of the search, and she didn’t need to find a loose strand of hair to be sure that someone had made an extended stay in this room.

“Oh? What’s this?”

Agrippina came across a wineglass in the corner of the room, seemingly forgotten by her dependable housekeeper. Though it looked like any other chalice, she immediately brought it up to her nose to smell the faint scent left behind.

“Blood,” she murmured. “I’m beginning to see the full picture.”

Duke Martin had hurried off despite his important role at the banquet, his kin had then appeared in this room for mysterious reasons, and Erich was unresponsive to her telepathic messages. The boy was the kind of model lackey to reply even in the dead of night, and there were only two times he failed to respond after a successfully

transmitted thought: when he was too exhausted for telepathy to wake him, or when he was backed into a corner and couldn't spare any focus.

As vast as the Empire was, few in it could kill that monster as he was now. An average College researcher would struggle to *flee* unless they specialized in combat; if Erich chose to run away, then even fewer could catch him.

There was only one conclusion: he was caught up in some ridiculous nonsense that had nearly gotten him killed again.

Truly, could she ask for a more entertaining servant?

"Well," Agrippina said, "it at least is apparent that he wasn't fooling around with some boring girl. Perhaps I shall forgive him."

That said, she couldn't wait to see how he'd try to worm his way out of this one.

Pleased to discover that she was not alone in her fatigue, the lady put the parlor behind her, ready to enjoy a nice bath and a good sleep.

[Tips] Spells that probe into people's souls are terrifyingly accurate, and some can expose a target's name or appearance with frightening detail.

Late Spring of the Thirteenth Year

Reporting Quests

Adventurers are nomadic entrepreneurs. As such, they must bear the responsibility of reporting their results to whoever hired them, even if that news is painful to deliver.

I'd mentioned that the world wasn't lenient enough for everything to end happily ever after back when we'd been brainstorming ways of saving Miss Celia, and my claim was valid. We humans were fated to clean up after the messes we'd made—personally, faithfully, and in a way that would appease whomever owned the property the mess was made on.

“So, what sort of charming little excuse have you brought for me?”

After finishing the game of ehrengarde with Miss Celia in her midnight greenhouse, Mika and Elisa had come to liven up the party. We'd all enjoyed tea for a bit and gone our separate ways—save for Mika, who'd caught Lady Franziska's eye and gotten whisked away—but upon carrying my sister home, I was faced with cruel reality: our master had returned before we knew it.

Don't get me wrong. I'd known that this woman had some means of telling who intruded on her territory. Rather, I would have been worried if she *didn't*. My employer was exceptional even among her immortal peers; I would sooner expect lightning to arc across blue skies than to see her feeling under the weather.

And so, after tucking in Elisa—my safe return had gotten her so worked up that she'd fallen asleep by the time we'd left the Bernkastel estate—our master's first words to me following her own safe return were as previously mentioned.

“First and foremost,” I said with the most deferential expression I could muster, “I must celebrate this occasion from the bottom of my heart. I am overjoyed to see that you have returned unharmed.”

Spewing the most servile thing I could think of, I knelt before the couch she was laying on. I was prepared to submit myself to her whims.

Frankly, I had no delusions of trying to fool Lady Agrippina. She was the kind of playful—nay, *mocking* enemy found in the back of advanced rule books, whose existence was a challenge to the player:

fight her if you *dare*. What was the point in trying to hide information from a monster that could bring down a full party of maxed-out PCs? If she felt like it, she could strip my soul bare with psychosorcery; an honest apology was a much, much better choice than lying.

“You have my deepest apologies for allowing guests in without your permission, be it only into the parlor as it was. This decision was mine and mine alone, and I am prepared to bear responsibility for it.”

“Oh, my loyal servant. It pleases me to see that you understand your own transgressions. After all, they say a retainer who cannot sense their master’s anger is fated to a short life.”

H-Holy shit. This was why the upper class were so scary: they could mull over the lives and deaths of us peasants as if it were chitchat, sporting the same thin smile and easy tone of voice as usual.

That said, I wasn’t a blithering enough idiot to show up without preparing an excuse—one good enough to convince the likes of the madam, at that. I told her the full story without any omissions or exaggerations: everything from how I met Miss Celia to how we’d helped her escape; the battle from last night; and my meeting and subsequent acquaintance with Lady Franziska.

Lady Agrippina listened to my tale in silence—laughter did not count—until I was completely finished. I couldn’t see what part of my misfortune was so amusing as to leave her gripping her sides in pain, but after I’d retold everything, she simply said, “I shall put it on your tab.”

“...What?”

“I’m saying that I shall let you off with the small debt of a single favor.”

Wiping a single tear from her eye, the madam named a price several times more frightening than a mere fine. Was I crazy, or was handing this woman a blank contract basically the same thing as suicide?

Wait, no. At least with suicide I’d get to die a peaceful death... Still, I supposed this was a better fate than someone of my standing could have realistically hoped for.

“A...favor?”

“Your account was entertaining, and it appears as though everything has been tied up nicely, so I don’t mind. I was able to confirm that you have some sense of your place, as well.”

“Is that truly acceptable?”

“The question of whether it’s acceptable or not is mired in all manner of issues, but consider this: had you handed that girl in, the situation would only have worsened. The grudge of a noble scorned is quite something.”

To tell the truth, I had planned on using that as another excuse.

While Miss Celia wasn't the type to obsess about revenge, there had been a chance that her pursuers were bandits merely masquerading as noble retainers. If I'd let her slip into their hands, who knew what her parents would do to me? Or even if they truly did belong to her house, it was possible that she'd resent me for foiling her getaway and exact vengeance on me after marrying—or so the justification went.

The real Miss Celia was a saint in all but name; I was sure such dark thoughts never even crossed her mind. Still, an enraged aristocrat was more than capable of fashioning guilt for a lower-class enemy to don.

"I should think this conclusion as clean as they come," Lady Agrippina said. "Though I suppose you *did* nearly die again."

"...Yes, well, I'd rather not experience my limbs flying off ever again."

"I'm sure. They don't grow back and are challenging to replace, so take care of them, will you?"

I don't need to hear that from you—I know plenty well they don't grow back. I was acutely aware that my irreplaceable arms and legs were only with me thanks to Miss Celia.

But come to think of it, who had that guy been, anyway? Lady Franziska had said not to worry because she'd administered him a "healthy dose of discipline," but that mage had at *least* been on the level of a College professor. Trying to figure out why he'd been waiting for me—and trying to look *cool* doing it—confounded me to no end.

He'd appeared with all the pomp and circumstance of an unprepared GM rolling dice to figure out what kind of boss to place at the end of a mission. There was a palpable malice in his placement, as if I'd dodged the true final boss and forced the world to place an unavoidable encounter on my escape route to make sure the climax didn't fizzle out. I'd seen this sort of thing before: once, my old crew and I had tried to pilfer the precious gems out of some ruin and were on the verge of escaping without incident when we randomly "discovered" that the pillars holding the place up had been crystal golems all along.

Judging from his demeanor, I could tell that the masked nobleman had been toying with me, but not much else. Seriously, why had that broken enemy just been waiting there?

"With that said," Lady Agrippina went on, "strip."

"Huh?"

"I said strip."

Yes, *ma'am*.

Though her order came out of nowhere, I couldn't talk back if she was going to insist. He who has wronged was ever at the mercy of she

who has been wronged.

I took off the shirt I'd been given at the Bernkastel estate, and the madam stopped me, saying that my upper half would do. She then began to ogle with an unhidden gaze.

Personally, I found my young build lacking and frail, despite my developing muscles. My shoulders were beginning to gain definition, my limbs had started to grow stronger, and I'd long since left my childish potbelly behind; yet I was still far from the virile physique I was so enamored with.

More to the point, though, I'd already checked in the mirror to confirm that my detached arm and legs bore no trace of their gruesome injuries. Not only that, but my run-in with the crank of high rank had seen me tumbling this way and that; my "Daisy Blossom" spell alone had blasted me straight into a pillar. I should've looked mushier than a bruised banana, and yet I couldn't find so much as a scab.

"Hmm..."

However, Lady Agrippina could see what I could not. Her gaze ran down an invisible line where my flesh had once parted. Even when I really put my mind to it, I couldn't detect any lingering evidence of how reality had been warped; this was yet another example of how much more capable her eyes were.

Gods, it's so tempting. If I could see the world as well as her, the edge I'd gain in arcane combat would be unquestionable. But a mystic swordsman couldn't afford to divert points away from physical attributes; I didn't want to spread myself too thin and end up being lousy at everything.

"The gods certainly do work miracles," the madam mused. "Not even those flesh-crazed cultists of Setting Sun could graft skin this naturally. From a thaumaturgical standpoint, it is nearly as if your arm had never been severed at all."

"I didn't realize it was that impressive."

"Nerves, arteries, bones and the marrow in them—human bodies are more than mere clay. One can cultivate replacement skins all day, but effort cannot replicate healing this perfect. I can see why those poor maniacs eye the faithful with such envy."

Gently, Lady Agrippina's finger reached out and traced the absent scar. Even though she caught me off guard, I remained totally sound of mind. Despite having already experienced a rather embarrassing accident during my trip to Wustrow, I had at least yet to let my preferences drift too far from reputability. Something instinctual in my soul whispered to my body: *This one's a no-go.* Despite all the trouble my teen body had been causing me recently, I figured it deserved a bit of praise for its prudence here.

“Ahh, but there is residue of the magical variety: a spell that misaligns bits of space to render anything occupying it into mincemeat. How vulgar. An attack of this sort scoffs at the very notion of evasion and defense... Standard conceptual barriers would shatter instantly. What sort of depraved life must you live to come up with a means to turn mere embodiment into a weakness?”

Amazingly, Lady Agrippina managed to see through the true nature of the formula off the faintest leftover mana clinging to my wound. As impressive as her depth of knowledge was, I was too busy trembling at having been the target of the attack to marvel.

I'd been lucky to *only* have three limbs twisted off. If what she was saying was true, I should've been a reorganized mess of meat; the spell was like crumpling up a piece of paper to crush the stickman drawn on it.

“Mm, I've gotten the gist. I've memorized this mana signature; that will be enough.”

“What? Are you planning on looking into the person who attacked me?”

“Indeed. Though it isn't as if I intend to avenge you or anything.”

“I know *that* much...”

“Call it a personal curiosity. Feel free to make yourself decent.”

A sweet fragrance wafted my way as I put my clothes back on: finished with a quick chore, the madam had decided it was time for a smoke break. I carefully tried to slip my neck through my shirt without letting my hair get caught, but just as I did, a cold voice cut through the cloth to sting my ears.

“It is a stroke of fortune that you're alive...but I will not tolerate a second ‘all's well that ends well, happily ever after.’”

The usual play in her tone was gone, and her reproach was not followed by a lighthearted confirmation; this was a warning in the truest sense. I jammed my head through my collar, hair be damned, and quickly got back on my knees.

“I am well aware.”

“Mm, very well. Anyhow, I shall be charging your patron from now on whenever money is involved, so make sure to see through the preparations on that end.”

“As you will.”

“I'm sure you're very tired, so you may leave for today. Resume your duties tomorrow morning.”

Anger was most terrifying when it came from an ordinarily freehanded master; a happily ever after truly was too much to ask for. Though I didn't regret my decision, this adventure of mine had come with a steep debt...

[Tips] Arcane limb replacement is an imperfect craft. Newly generated flesh is sure to differ in skin tone at minimum, and requires long hours of rehabilitation to reconnect and retrain the nervous system.

Meanwhile, the faithful cast miracles that outperform these mystic surgeries off the back of spiritualism alone. The magia who dedicate themselves to the arduous pursuit of knowledge often look at priests and the like with unjustified envy and anger.

Whether I was dying or Miss Celia was running for her life, the capital chugged along all the same. The only notable difference tonight was that there were far fewer guards walking the streets. Now that the chaos had subsided—I didn't want to imagine what had gone on behind the scenes—there wasn't much point in keeping watch at every corner, so I guessed it was inevitable.

Looking back, I felt awful about how I'd treated the dependable guardians of our city. My back had been against the wall, and I hadn't been able to hold back as much as I would've liked; a fair number of them must have suffered broken bones. The crown offered good benefits, so they wouldn't struggle to find treatment or get paid leave, but worsening their daily lives came with pang of guilt.

Gingerly knocking someone out in one hit like some comic-book hero was an exacting task, but maybe that was just my own lack of skill talking. Unfortunately, people were too complex to go down after a single punch to the gut or neck, and smacking their heads was a shortcut to sustained injuries; strangulation didn't keep people down long enough, so that wasn't an option either. I could only ask that they lay the blame on my spineless performance and Miss Celia's immature father—preferably at a one-to-nine ratio.

Speaking of benefits, I'd nearly forgotten. Mika and I had met up at the Bernkastel manor, where we'd celebrated our mutual safe returns and I'd honored her courageous devotion, but I had yet to recognize two of the most important contributors to our cause.

“Ursula, Lottie.”

I whispered too quietly for anyone else to hear, but clearly enunciated their names. A cool and refreshing breeze rolled by, sweeping away the lukewarm night.

Yet as the current faded, it left behind two gifts on my head. I didn't need to look up; the alfar who had helped Miss Celia escape and whose valiant efforts indirectly saved my life were here.

They'd gone above and beyond for me. Had Miss Celia stowed away to Lipzi instead of calling for her aunt, I would have traded lives with that lunatic in the sewers at best. In the worst case, I could have missed my final shot and been reduced to chum without so much as

avenging myself.

And of course, the young lady's aeronautical adventure wouldn't have succeeded without Ursula and Lottie's help. The thing was a top imperial secret that would determine the political, economic, and military future of the nation: a posh girl oblivious to scouting methods was sure to be caught by security immediately without the help of these high-ranking fairies.

Alfar were so profoundly intimidating. If they could be bound to any sort of rhyme or reason instead of committing themselves to whimsy, I could see an entire new school of thought emerging amongst magia, dedicated to forging spells with fey assistance...though it was their unpredictability that made them fey in the first place.

"Here, Beloved One. Aren't you a tad late with your summons?"

"Wah... I'm tiiired..."

Their voices were downcast enough to make it clear Lottie's grumbling was founded in something real. *I wonder if something happened to them.*

"We received quite the earful, you see."

"Ughhh, we got yelled at for helping too much..."

Apparently, some of the most important alfar had scolded them with scathing intensity. While I'd known that the kings and queens of the fey realm were closer to spirits and gods than the rabble, I wouldn't have imagined that they'd be the ones directly rebuking these two.

Alfar were supposed to be aware of their own boundaries, keeping their meddling within reason. The two of them had answered my ambiguous request for them to help Miss Celia with enough effort to get them lectured.

...I guess they deserved a proper reward. They were my saviors, after all.

"Thank you both—I mean it. Is there anything I can do to repay you?"

"In that case, look over there."

Ursula leaned over the edge of my head, and I followed her outstretched finger to see a small clearing. It was an empty area meant to contain fires, just like the one Mika had been waiting in on the day of the parade.

"What say you to a dance? I'm afraid I won't be able to keep you to myself if I take you to the hill."

"Sure, let's dance."

I made my way over to the square, and another breeze came to whisk away one of the weights on my crown. In its place, the beautiful, full-sized girl I'd first met all those nights ago appeared to

greet me.

Her skin glimmered like deep honey under the moonlight, hidden only by overflowing currents of silver that blended into the orphic luminescence. Where the sterling river parted, the wings of a moon moth fluttered, blinking with otherworldly charm.

“Will you please take the lead?” she asked.

“Of course,” I answered.

Captivating, enchanting, and resolute, her vermilion eyes drooped into a smile.

Taking her small, graceful hand in mine, we began to dance. Ours was not a ballroom waltz in measured time, but the free movements of a rustic country swing; we spun around and around, drawing close and stepping away as it struck our fancy. As I twirled the same way I had during the festivals back in Konigstuhl, the svartalf elegantly moved to match.

We gently spun, then hugged and spun back, alternating steps as we faced one another. Locking our arms together, we used each other’s legs as axes to swing around and around. While I had to be careful not to drop Lottie—she was still busy pondering what she wanted—I merrily sustained the dance until beads of sweat began to form on my skin.

Seeing her alluring skin take on a faint blush in this festive mood made me understand the feelings of those who gave into temptation and were spirited away to the everlasting hill of twilight. Even though I wouldn’t go myself, I could tell it was surely a jolly place, free from any suffering. Had I lacked my promise with Margit, my duty to Elisa, or my family, maybe I wouldn’t have thought it such a terrible fate.

“That was wonderful.”

“Yeah, it sure was,” I said. “But man, I didn’t think I’d sweat like this considering how much training I do.”

We’d spent a whopping half hour dancing, and it was only now that I realized I was toeing a dangerous line. If others could see Ursula, then I was going to become an urban legend about some crazy kid dancing with alfar; if not, then I was just a lunatic dancing alone. Either way, an onlooker would call for the guards if they spotted me. While we’d thankfully managed to enjoy our dance without anyone bothering us, that was a bit careless of me.

“A boy’s sweat is a sacred thing,” Ursula said. Then, turning to Lottie, she said, “And what about you? I’ve had my fun, but how long are you going to think about this?”

“Um, ummm... Oh, oh! There’s a lot I want, but I’d like one locky, please!”

“Of my hair?”

I tilted my head, confused as to why she’d want that. But

apparently, a blond child's hair was literally worth its weight in gold amongst fairies.

"Oh, ohh!" Ursula shouted. "No fair! I should've chosen that too!"

"No!" Lottie shouted back. "You already got a dancy, Ursula! The locky is Lottie's!"

"This isn't fair! You would be dried jerky in that cage by now if it weren't for me!"

"Nuh-uh! Would not! Lottie was napping!"

Ignoring their yapping back and forth, I untied my hair and cut off a small portion to bundle up for her. Long ago, imperial citizens used to weave decorative cords out of their hair, but modern spinning technology meant that only the poorest still did. I had no idea what she was going to use this for.

"Wow! Pretty! Thanks, Lovey One!" Smaller than the bundle of hair she was squeezing, Lottie happily twirled around while humming, "What oh what should I use it for?"

On the other hand, the fairy of the night was glaring at her friend with murderous envy... This was one of those episodes that would evolve into a grudge later, wasn't it?

"Okay, okay, *fine*. Ursula, you can have one too, and Lottie gets a dance."

"Huh? Are you sure? I mean, I'd be happy to accept if you're willing."

"Really?! I get a locky *and* a dancy?! Yay!"

For me, seeing someone's mood sour before my eyes was much more taxing and bothersome than doing a bit of extra work. Besides, cutting off a bit of hair and dancing was nothing compared to what they'd done for me. Even if my actions bore more meaning than I knew, even if I was paying a hefty price that I couldn't yet see, I thought I had a responsibility to repay them for saving my life.

I lopped off another tuft of hair, which pleased Ursula greatly. Then Lottie took my outstretched hand—still small—and invited me to dance. I think opinion may be split on whether or not ours counted as a "dance," but she seemed content to hold on to my finger and zip around, so I figured it was fine.

"By the way, what are you going to do with that hair?"

"I wonder," Ursula said. "What *will* I do with it? A necklace or hairpiece would be lovely, but I'd adore a ring or anklet too."

"Lottie's gonna ask for clothes!"

Accessories and clothing? Did alfar have the ability to process human hair into cloth? They sounded like a certain nomadic horse-riding people on the surface, which did not help make them less scary.

Regardless, I was just happy that they were happy. But while I could swing a sword for hours on end, my legs and hips were

incredibly sore from just a bit of dancing. Maybe it was because I wasn't used to it.

With my debts repaid, I was ready to go home and get some sleep...but then noticed that Ursula's cheery mood had vanished, and that she was staring straight at me.

"...Is there something wrong?"

"I know you've given us two whole rewards, but let me say one last thing."

Two and three aren't all that different. I nodded her along, and her expression only grew graver.

"The next time you find yourself risking your life in combat, don't cast us away, will you?"

"Oh..."

She went there. True: had these two been with me, the fight would have gone more smoothly. I might not have even needed a last-minute rescue at all. Magecraft generally only affected targets that the caster could perceive, so Ursula's stealth could have protected me from attacks; Lottie's wind would have been perfect for throwing off the hounds' noses and pushing away the bugs.

However, without their help, who knows what would've happened to Miss Celia?

Unable to come up with a response, I stood there in silence. Watching me, Ursula came to her own conclusions and shrank back down with a quiet giggle.

"What a helpless boy."

And just like when they'd appeared, a passing breeze whisked the alfar away. All that was left in their wake was a sweaty fool still bumbling for the right answer.

What was I meant to do?

My mind spun trying to digest her request, but only one thing made itself certain to me: I would ask those two to help me again if something important to me was on the line. Despite knowing I risked earning their ire, I had more to protect than met the eye if I wanted to stay true to myself.

"Man..."

I retied my hair and looked up at the moon, but not even the ever-shining Goddess of Night would bless me with the answer.

[Tips] At times, fey dances can cause fatigue intense enough to kill. Yet those who try to stop find themselves unable to pull away.

The church was an insular world. Though it had links to secular life of every class, the values and hierarchies of religious orders were

determined almost entirely internally; for good or ill, each was its own world.

Being collectives dedicated to the act of offering their worship to gods and spreading Their teachings to the masses, this was in many ways a necessity. The faithful lauded nobles who renounced their worldly status as honorable, and graciously welcomed priests who studied from the lower castes of society; that sufficed for them in their closed systems.

However, they were not without their share of troubles.

The Trialist Empire of Rhine revered a pantheon of gods headed by Father Sun and Mother Moon; while theologians respected all those that presided over them, devotion was a practice exclusive to a single deity.

Naturally, the various churches stood in solidarity, sharing institutional structures and ranking titles to smooth over the process of cooperation. Yet so long as the gods competed for finite worship, it was inevitable that some would be on less than stellar terms with others. The divine, in Their indefinite squabbles to extend Their reach and secure Their divinity, relied on Their followers as plausibly deniable proxies; at the same time, those very followers split themselves into competing circles—power struggles were impossible to avoid.

While a certain blond boy would have written it all off as a bunch of obnoxious fanatics quibbling over minutiae, in truth, these affairs were the backdrop of great tales ranging the spectrum of comedy and tragedy.

As things stood, one of the premier sources of strife was the matter of species. If an immortal and a mortal knocked on the gates of a monastery at the same time, it was inevitable that the latter would climb the religious ladder more quickly; the undying were almost always slower to mature both physically and spiritually.

“Allow me to thank you again, dear Abbess. I shall be in your care.”

“You have done well to come...Sister Constance.”

Stratonice of Megaera, the Head Abbess of the Great Chapel, was the premier authority on the Night Goddess’s will in all the Empire and its satellite states. Today she faced the unsolvable challenge posed by the priestess kneeling before her: a subordinate and former mentor both.

The Head Abbess was a goblin, and at thirty, she was beginning to gray. Where most of her kind cared little for faith, she was a talented devotee who’d risen to the rank of bishop; during her time at Fullbright Hill, her fervent prayers had earned her the right to grand miracles. In the years following her initial studies, she’d roamed the

lands, helping the needy and teaching the ignorant—achievements that the holy Mother had amply rewarded with more miracles still. She had all but reached the peak of her craft, and yet her large, golden eyes anxiously darted to and fro.

None could blame her: when she had been a wee runt in the custody of the church, her caretaker had been none other than the kneeling Cecilia she now faced. This girl had borne witness to all of her failures as a child, and had wiped up after her mistakes in many ways, worst of all literal.

Naturally, having a living record of her embarrassing past reappear in her pocket as a nun of no station put Stratonice on edge. Of course, she loved and revered the vampire for having looked after her and for teaching her the value of worship; even to this day, most of her theological positions were perfect models of her mentor's.

Alas, how much *trouble* Cecilia represented was a different story. Not only was she an *imperial*—the same kind that was currently preparing to shuffle possession of the throne—but she was the sort of person to shoot down any mention of promotion by citing that she had yet to come of age. At times, the vampire had even threatened to bring her family into the discussion if the church dared to raise her beyond the rank of a simple priestess. What was she if not a ticking time bomb?

Balances of power were of great importance even amongst the religious. The everlasting were not to be given ranks lightly, and doubly so when the person in question was an heiress liable to renounce the cloth for secular life. Cecilia's advancement had been discussed among the top authorities in the church on multiple occasions, only to have been invariably shot down.

But at the same time, she was the picture-perfect embodiment of an ardent believer, complete with the trust of their Goddess to wield Her power. Regardless of the political mumbo jumbo that surrounded her, she ought to have been a pastor—the minimum title required to lead a congregation—at the very least.

Instead, Cecilia had been practically left to her own devices, free to do whatever she pleased as a lowly nun without responsibilities, much to the horror of her pupil-cum-boss Stratonice.

"Please, won't you call me Celia? I don't suppose you've aged enough to forget our time together at Fullbright Hill, have you, Bishop Stratonice?"

"Very well...Celia. And though you may not remember, I have turned thirty this year. I cannot expect an imperishable soul like your own to grasp it, but I am well on my way into old age."

It wasn't as if Stratonice suspected this girl, still adorably asking to be referred to by nickname, of trying to play political games with

her. If nothing else, the goblin was a woman of faith: she cared not for the prestige and distinctions she'd been bestowed with, and would have much preferred to return to the rank of a lowly priestess and set off on another pilgrimage if she could.

However, she was also conscious of her duties to the Church of the Night Goddess and all its followers. An average goblin lived roughly to forty, and she had already spent most of her time. She didn't want to besmirch her twilight years by setting off a massive explosive. Perhaps the story would've been different had she been prepared to take responsibility herself, but she would be struggling to walk in another seven or eight years; leaving a catastrophe for her successor to handle didn't sit right with her.

"Already? I can remember the day you first arrived at the monastery as if it were yesterday. Time passes so quickly."

"What you perceive as quick rapids, I have waded through as a muddy stream." The immortal's profound surprise made the short-lived abbess want to sigh. "Come, let me prepare your room."

Cecilia had come stating that her estate in the capital was an uncomfortable place, and that this opportunity to study in a place beyond the holy mountain must have been part of the Night Goddess's will. That alone was fine. However, Stratonice could only pray that she wouldn't bring imperial entanglements along with her, or that her unshakable piety wouldn't cause any unforeseen problems.

The desire to treat her childhood caretaker just as well as she'd been treated clashed with the pure terror that came with stuffing a live, delicate bomb in her inner pocket. Unable to grumble in front of her mentor, the aging goblin bottled up her fears; marching through this conundrum to repay her debts as best she could was but another trial from the Goddess, or so she told herself.

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Cecilia said. "This bag is all I've brought. And I won't be needing a personal room. Would you please lead me to the commons?"

"You never change, Celia. Would it not do to at least, say, bring along something more fitting of a girl your age? Our merciful Mother may emphasize purity in abstinence, but She does not forbid all manner of pleasure."

"It simply isn't for me. In fact, I recently found myself in a rather peculiar situation where I donned a so-called maidenly dress, but I quickly learned that I am best in these robes."

The vampire's continued extremism caused the abbess to worry. Although she was an ordained bishop, she had eight children—goblins generally gave birth to packs of three to five children at a time—and nearly fifty grandchildren; she was beginning to suspect that this immortal girl was going to spend the next eternity alone in the

church.

The gods did not disapprove of marriage and childbirth; rather, They espoused it as one of the major trials in the act of worship that was life, teaching lessons about the joys and sufferings it entailed. The Harvest Goddess's flock went so far as to consider the unwed to be fundamentally incomplete; while the followers of Night were not so extreme, a great deal of their clergy were married. When teaching a layperson, the burden of understanding ultimately fell on the learner, but those teaching their own children were responsible for their upbringing. Providing instructive compassion and love to one's own flesh and blood was seen as the most difficult test of one's character.

But wait, Stratonice thought. A corner of her brain bubbled up to pick out a tiny detail: the girl had said she was *best* in her robes, and not that her robes would do. Something must have happened to make her actively prefer them and consider them best suited for her...like, say, a compliment from a boy.

"Perhaps I spoke too soon. I suppose some things do change."

Although the vampire looked nearly identical to when she'd last seen her, the sands of time had brought change with them, as they were wont to do. The reddish-brown skin full of wrinkles she'd inherited from her forest tribe scrunched up in a great big smile reminiscent of her childhood.

"Do you think so? I've stopped getting any taller of late, so I can't help but believe my period of growth is over."

"If I'm not mistaken, the average vampire matures after roughly a century, and slowly conforms to the appearance most comfortable to the soul, yes? You still have many years of growth ahead of you, *Miss Cecilia*."

"Oh, please stop." Cecilia frowned. "However will I carry myself if the Head Abbess refers to me so?"

"All is well if the person in charge allows it," Stratonice said, slapping her mentor-slash-subordinate on the butt—she physically could not reach her back—and beckoning her on to a tour of the area.

The two of them visited the rooms for chores, charity, and prayer; then the abbess showed the nun the various minor temples that the masses frequented, and the schedules for service and instruction. When all was said and done, their stroll had taken quite some time.

This was an indulgent use of one's day for someone as busy as the Head Abbess of the Great Chapel, but that meant little to a pair bound by ties as long-standing as theirs. Besides, Stratonice had blundered terribly in her dealings with the imperial heiress once before, and walking halfway around Berylin was nothing in comparison.

"How do you like the Great Chapel?" the abbess asked. "It isn't quite as nice as Fullbright Hill, but isn't this temple splendid?"

“Indeed. I’ve grown quite fond of it. The people of town seem much more austere and fervent in prayer than I’d imagined. I’m relieved to see that the rumors we’d heard of how callous the capital is were untrue.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Think of this as your new home and rest easy here for ten years, twenty—however long you wish.”

Giggling, Cecilia said, “Then I will take you up on that offer and relax here, devoting myself to serving the community.”

The vampire’s smile finally gave the abbess some peace of mind. Stratonice knew that the girl had been involved in some sort of incident before arriving; she didn’t know what that incident entailed, but suffice it to say that it was something major. As such, she saw no better way to repay her kindness than by preparing a sanctuary where she could unwind.

The undying were also oftentimes unmoving: once she settled in, she wouldn’t leave for another five to ten years at least. There was a real chance that Cecilia wouldn’t return to Fullbright Hill for another two or three decades. Stratonice felt blessed that she was in a position to offer and protect that sanctuary; at this rate, she would be able to rest in her final years with her mentor quietly devoting herself to further prayer.

“Oh, the bells,” Cecilia said. “My, is it that time already?”

Stratonice looked up at the darkening skies and saw the bells in every tower ringing. These tolls in particular were to notify the denizens of the capital that evening had arrived, and they marked suppertime at their own chapel. But just as she turned back to the vampire to invite her to the dining hall, Cecilia suddenly remembered a question and asked away.

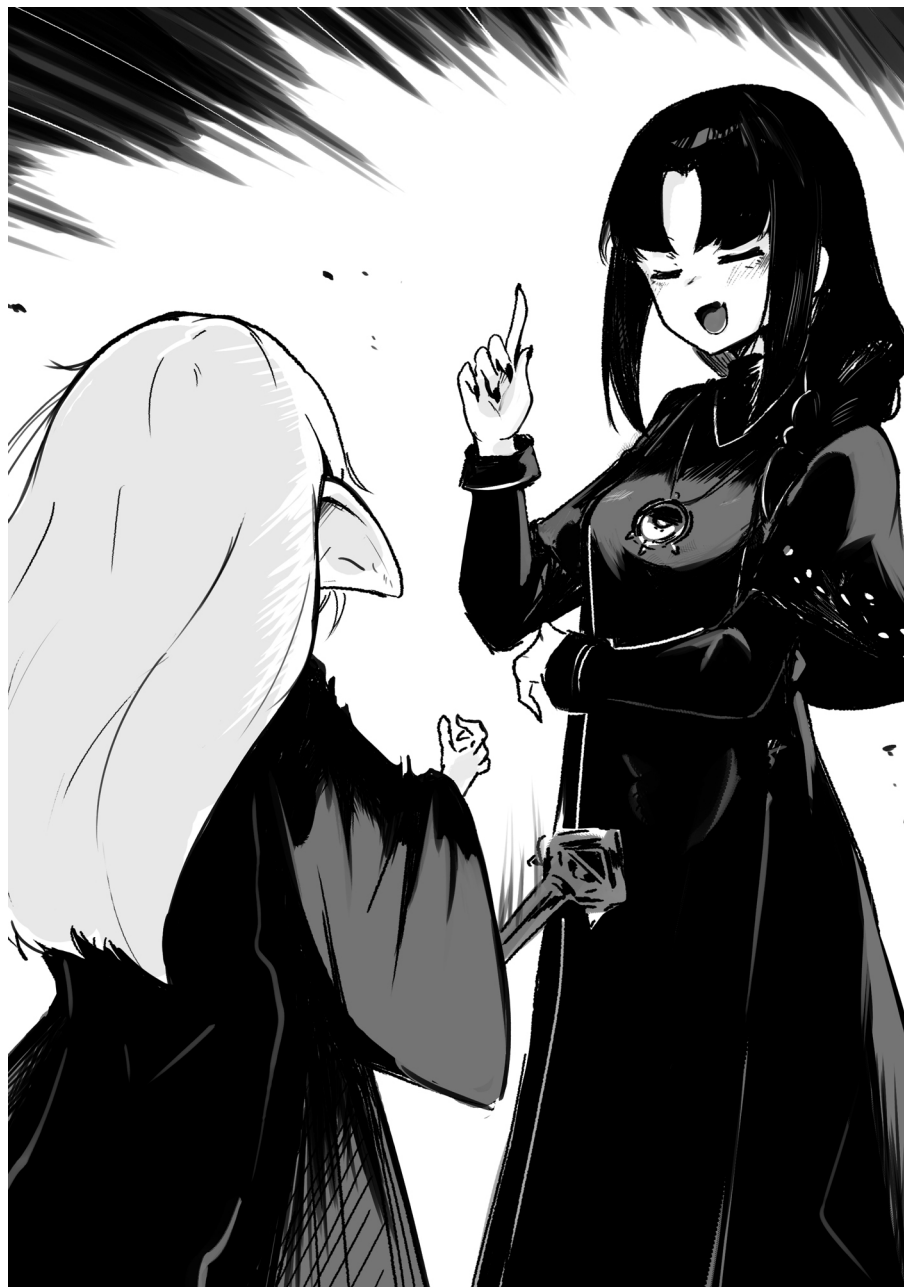
“By the way, Bishop Stratonice, you spent some few years as a lay priestess, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did indeed. During my pilgrimage, I thought it would be a good opportunity for me to tour the countryside as well, and spent three...no, four years or so out there. I tried my hand at many a miracle and advanced my clerical rank, unordained as I was. I remember the journey fondly.”

“May I ask you for any tricks you learned during the endeavor?”

Tricks? The goblin cocked her head; she was half-doubtful of the girl’s intent, and half-surprised by the unexpected question. But little did she know, the walking bomb was ready to set off an explosion of cataclysmic scale as soon as she replied, “Why do you ask?”

“I have stumbled into a century to do as I please, so after studying here for a short while, I plan to travel the lands as a lay priestess.”



Every thought in Stratonice's mind went flying. A missile had directly struck her brain, demolishing any semblance of rational thought and sending the staff in her hand tumbling toward the floor. Her mentor reached down to pick it up with a casual, "Oh my," but the abbess couldn't even rouse the good sense to stop her. This one carefree proclamation had been explosive enough to shock her to her core; the relief she had felt only a moment ago had been blasted to dust.

For a moment, she considered the possibility that she was misremembering what it meant to be a lay priestess; alas, the definition had not once been changed in all the years since the Rhinian pantheon's founding. Lay priests renounced membership from every church, leading the people of the land with nothing more than their own devotion.

This was not in the same realm as a simple pilgrimage or mission catered toward educating the masses. To cast one's lot with the laity was to sever the final tethers to safety—it was to offer oneself whole in the name of whatever it was that they believed to be most virtuous. Only those ready to die a forgotten death in unknown lands dared take the pledge.

Cecilia was far from ignorant; she knew the true meaning and hardship such a journey represented. It was unthinkable that she was taking the matter lightly, and yet she'd announced her intentions all the same... She must have really meant it.

Had she been any other immortal nun, Stratonice would have agreed so as to not let the infinity of existence wear away her being. But this girl was *imperial*, and in the not-so-distant future, she would be the only child of the sitting Emperor.

As the church and state were separate entities on paper, no one could stop the faithful Sister Cecilia from declaring herself a lay priestess and venturing off on a pilgrimage to foreign lands. However, the world was built on truths hidden behind facades and exceptions: just as theologians offered their "counsel" on some secular matters, politicians could put in "requests" with the churches. Having the crown princess wander off on her own accord was problematic to say the least.

"Y-You must be joking," Stratonice stammered. "You do know what lay priesthood entails, yes? Destitute and forgotten, your pillows will be rocks on the sides of roofless roads, and you'll be forced to march over the lifeless corpses of the fallen on your path."

"Yes, and? I may be rather fond of jests, but I consider myself prudent enough not to kid about my course in life. I'm a bit hurt that you would think I was joking, Bishop."

I'm panicking because I know you're not! The words climbed up into the woman's throat, but she managed to swallow them back. Here she'd thought her long years of discipline had freed her from the grasp of wrath, but it seemed the Head Abbess had yet to forsake all worldly emotion.

Those worldly emotions whispered a terrible truth to Stratonice. Cecilia's tone betrayed an absolute conviction; the girl already considered this decision a forgone conclusion. The busy bishop dwelled for a moment on the ways she might be able to convince the nun of no station to stop, but her childhood memories of how unshakable Cecilia had been when her mind was set caused the poor woman to give up.

And, in truth, Cecilia was the kind of resolute soul to flee her family without hesitation, going so far as to hide away in the Head Abbess's luggage in the name of not inheriting her house. Nothing Stratonice could say or do would change her mind now.

Just imagining the ridiculous struggle it would take to convince those involved to let her set off *unaccompanied* made Stratonice want to curl up into a ball. *If only*, she sighed. *If only she were unlikable enough to cast away.*

[Tips] Archbishops are the highest-ranking members of the clergy. Each god is served by only one archbishop, and they introduce themselves by their deity of choice to make their allegiances clear. For example, the Sun God's archbishop would introduce themselves as the Archbishop of the Sun.

However, each religious sect has minor variations on the standard hierarchical system, so exceptions are not unheard of.

Skill is nourished by taste; to foster talent, one must engage with the works of the talented.

Mika had heard these words from her master enough times to know them by heart. Every oikodomurge was also an architect, and if this rule held true, then the young student thought that she must have been truly blessed.

"All the buildings from the era of first light are so beautiful. I love seeing how the fundamentalists and aestheticists clashed in their designs."

Propping up her chin, the young student sighed in awe as she laid her eyes upon the massive blueprint spread out across the table. It dated back to the days when the Empire had yet to celebrate its first centennial; Richard the Creator and his successor, the Cornerstone Emperor, had finally finished laying the foundations of their nation, and the country had become stable enough for matters of beauty and

novelty to enter the public consciousness.

In those days, fundamentalists who aimed above all else to create sturdy and practical buildings out of simple materials had shared the stage with aestheticists who sang the praises of beauty in form; the clashing ideologies had given rise to an indescribable style that continued to charm architects well into the modern day.

The years and months since then were long enough for some immortals of the time to have chosen death since. Nobles liked to rebuild and refurbish to keep up with the latest trends, and the buildings that remained in their original, ancient form were a rarity. More people came and went in the capital than anywhere else, and only a handful of works belonging to owners with classical tastes still stood. Since begging a wealthy landowner to tour their private estate was unthinkable, the best one could usually do was to quietly gaze at a distance.

Yet here Mika was, savoring the original sketches of designs lost to the sands of time. Her heart overflowed with joy, but also with gratitude for the magnanimous Franziska Bernkastel, who had let her into this manor.

It had all begun with a curious twist of fate. Following her life-or-death escape, Mika had been found by Cecilia's messengers, which eventually led to her acquaintance with Franziska: after reuniting with Erich, the young mage was pulled along to meet the priestess's aunt—it wouldn't do to only introduce *one* of her cherished friends—and quickly earned the woman's favor.

In her feminine form, Mika's face was softer and personably somber; the waves of her glossy raven hair were just an inch or two shy of adding a flirtatious note to her overall impression. Apparently, she was the spitting image of the heroine that Franziska was writing in her most recent play.

The playwright had been stuck in a bog of writer's block, and the student's appearance threw logs into the furnace fueling her pen. As such, the grande dame began to shower the girl with favors: if the typical immortal illness of pampering the fleeting had claimed her niece, then now was as good a time as ever to broaden her horizons beyond actors for the first time in generations.

Ultimately, Mika found herself in an extraordinary arrangement wherein she had free access to the Bernkastel estate, and could even browse the family's gargantuan library so long as she sent notice of her arrival ahead of time.

While this manor had originally belonged to Franziska's clan as a whole, the construction of a new estate closer to the imperial palace had turned it into no more than a spare; nowadays, it was basically the woman's personal storage unit for anything she left in Berylin.

Among her many belongings were books: a writer needed reference material to breathe reality into her works, and the documents she didn't plan to use in the near future came to rest here.

In the past, the empress had attempted to draft a historical drama, and the evidence of her labor could be found in the ancient blueprints lining the shelves. Her collection began in the Empire's era of first light, sampled from neighboring kingdoms and satellite states, and even featured illustrations that came in through the once-closed Eastern Passage.

For the oikodomurge hopeful, this treasury of knowledge was drool-worthy. Though the College's vault of books contained architectural secrets that would take lifetimes to uncover on her own, most of the material there was devoted to the efficiency and practicality of infrastructure. The elegance, refinement, and unique appeal called for in general design was nowhere to be found.

To be fair, this wasn't without reason. The oikodomurges that graduated from the Imperial College were perhaps the most bureaucratic of all magia. What the state wanted from their designs was very traditional and rigid; as far as the crown was concerned, they were to keep the fancy eccentric stuff to private ventures.

Therefore, those who wished to learn how to make pretty buildings had no choice but to borrow blueprints from magia who built those pretty buildings on the side. Alas, while Mika's master was a brilliant oikodomurge with strong opinions on foundational skills and disaster prevention, he had exactly zero interest in unofficial projects. Whenever he was invited to tea, it was invariably to discuss the restoration, disassembly, or reconstruction of some decrepit manor or another—his friends were much the same, and were of equally little help.

Mika may have knocked on the College's doors with a dream to come up with infrastructure that would help support her family living in the icy north, but her ambition extended to erecting a magnificent landmark or two that would be remembered back home for years to come. As earnest as she was, the bizarre and eccentric still caught her eye; the glorious architecture of Berylin had deeply moved her when she'd first arrived, and she wanted to leave something that would do the same for future youths heading into town from the countryside.

The documents here were fertilizer for a refined set of sensibilities. Not only were there blueprints, but the library contained sketches of expected final designs and even tiny models built as teaching tools. Engaging with everything she could find proved a most fulfilling use of her day.

"Doth thine efforts not stray into the land of excess? Overwork shall undo thee."

“Oh, Lady Franziska!”

The study was lit by but a single window, so as not to ruin the tomes found within; Franziska appeared just as the girl had begun to wish for a reading light. Mika rose to her feet to prepare a greeting fit for the noblewoman, but she waved her down. As always, the vampire had on nothing but an excessively provocative toga as she took a seat across the table.

“Thy zeal is commendable. Would that my troupe were manned by players so keen to study their lines—perhaps then the flower of my direction would remain unwithered.”

“Well, I’m just doing this because I like it.”

“Mistake me not—that you relish it so is the genius I praise. Of late, even Berylin’s most storied stages bedeck themselves in hollow talent, content to trace the skin of the script, bewitched by the polish they put to the apple as the worm-holes flourish within. The better thing—oh, how shall I put this? I would see the intent that hath been lain in the cast’s every twitch and tongue-wag understood and brought to life. Thinkst thou not that it demeans the art for its face to claim himself master of the soul’s full palette while he feels aught but a void that fame might yet fill?”

The leading question drew out a polite smile from Mika. Considering her own position as someone far from the gates of luxury, she felt she had no right to renounce those actors who might use the medium as a crutch to climb the social ladder. Plenty of students began their journey at the College for similar reasons, and there were even professors who considered themselves bureaucrats first and magia second.

Franziska’s viewpoint was that of a woman who had never known poverty, her courtship with art a comfortable one spent chasing its most high-minded ideals. She would seek the pinnacle of her craft regardless of its profit, but to expect the same of those who worked under her was a harsh ask indeed.

Still, silence was golden; an unclear smile was an almighty weapon. Mika was well versed enough in aristocratic dealings to know the virtue in keeping her opinions to herself. Sooner or later, those who failed to mince matters would find themselves minced in a much more literal sense.

For her part, Franziska did not comment on the girl’s vague response or goad her to elaborate: she, too, understood that her statement was but a reinforcement of her own ego. Though she did not force it upon anyone, she made it clear where she stood—the young student marveled that the playwright was a creator to her very core.

“Yet for all my aching,” Franziska said, “I find thee all too fit to

rise to the stage...”

“Though I hate to refuse you again, I’ve unfortunately been born to rather middling talents. My success so far in life has been the product of desperately clinging on to keep up with those around me. Relinquish the boot unfamiliar...”

“...Lest foot sores be thy aim. Ah, but Bernkastel singeth thusly as well: he who wears shoes uncounted—”

“—Calls spiders kith and centipedes kin, yes?”

“Thou hast learned thy classics!” the empress cackled merrily.

“I have my friend to thank for that.” The classical poet Bernkastel was Erich’s favorite, and he regularly borrowed lines from the ancient master when the pair played their pompous little games. Mika had remembered most of them as a matter of course.

“Ahh, but truly, black and gold art glorious atop the proscenium. My yearning strains to see thee share a spotlight with my niece’s chosen.”

“Yes, well...” Mika chuckled awkwardly. “I’m sure he isn’t any more comfortable with serious acting than I am.”

Every time their paths crossed, Franziska extended invitations to her troupe or asked if Mika wanted to follow her back to Lipzi when she returned in the near future. Every time, Mika had refused her: she genuinely didn’t believe she had the talent to begin learning a second craft, and there was still much to learn from her master here in Berylin. The young mage had no intention of giving up her dream for anyone, even if that meant refusing the matriarch of a terrifyingly powerful family time and time again.

“A shame, a shame,” Franziska sighed. “Will the College in Lipzi not suffice?”

The Imperial College of Magic was a leviathan of an institution, and the main headquarters in the capital was not enough to serve the entire Empire. Smaller campuses had been built in every region, serving the dual purposes of being schoolhouses and magus bridgeheads. The state didn’t want to let any promising students slip through the cracks, and the facilities were good starting points to help develop the surrounding area.

Truth be told, Mika could still hope to become a magus by studying in Lipzi. While the library there couldn’t hold a candle to the book vault in Berylin, they had access to a tremendous number of transcriptions, so it wasn’t *that* inconvenient.

“I don’t believe I’d have the fortune to stumble across another teacher as wise as my current master again. Looking at my current ties, I would say I’ve spent the better part of my luck when it comes to human relations.”

However, to encounter a mentor that she could accept as a true

master from the bottom of her heart was rare. No matter how well she might adapt to the new environment, people were irreplaceable.

“I see, I see. Then I yield. Let not thy resolution go forgotten.”

Witnessing this fledgling soul abandon fear and modesty to preserve what she valued most put the playwright in a terrific mood. So, after rescinding her invitation, she offered to instead become the girl’s patron—just like she was for her friend’s little sister.

From what Franziska had heard, this penniless student wasted much of her day earning coin, committing precious time to side hustles and day labor funneled through the College. The wealthy noble thought that she might be able to alleviate some of her burden, but was turned down yet again.

“Ingratitude is always met with ingratitude,” Mika said. “If I find a new backer to support me, I will be slinging mud on the name of the good magistrate who sent me here.”

“Ahh, then thou art here by word of recommendation?”

“Yes. I wasn’t the only one with magical talent, but he chose me—even knowing that I’m a tivisco.”

“And so thou hopest to turn thy accomplishments into honors to repay he who hath placed faith in thee. Thy virtue is marvelous.”

Local magistrates ran private schools because imperial aristocrats considered discovering promising youths a noble pursuit. Inspiring the lower classes by uncovering the gifted among them was a matter of course, and supplying the nation with capable talent was another responsibility that came with being part of His Imperial Majesty’s bulwark. Thus, casting doubt onto the merit of one’s benefactor was an ingratitude like no other. If Mika took this new offer of patronage, her magistrate would still earn the acclaim of having discovered a talented mage, but it would be more than a few steps short of what he would have received from supporting a notable magus from beginning to end.

“Forgive my dearth of tact,” Franziska said. “That is the last I will mention the idea.”

“No, *I* should be apologizing for my discourtesy,” Mika said, bowing her head. “Kicking aside your propositions made in good faith is yet another form of ingratitude...”

“Hah, fret not. In mine eyes, thy integrity in matters of debt and dream both art a delight more than thou shalt ever know. Prithee remain as thou art always.”

Would that the world were filled with persons of thy make, Franziska grumbled internally, *my pen might see some use yet.* The former empress looked at the girl and prayed to the Night Goddess from the bottom of her heart: *May her journey be a bright one.*

“Well, then. I entreat thee: let thy passions be of help to my niece

and her chosen favorite. I know not from where her habits come, but she has a bullish leaning; and tangled with that golden wolf pup as she's become, I foresee no shortage of challenge ahead."

Although Franziska had originally picked the girl out thinking that a friend of her caliber would benefit her niece's education, she now had a more personal fondness for Mika. Her initial goal had been to find her niece a friend whose memory would stay with her for all her life: one who could understand her as a maiden, who could accept her complaints as a man, and who could offer unique perspectives when neither.

Never had the empress expected that she would take such a liking to the mage herself; she laughed as it struck her that she was yet young despite her long life. Mortal farewells turned the everlasting into adults, but perhaps this world was full of nothing but children.

"Yes, of course," Mika said. "I swear on my life."

Greatly pleased by this response, the playwright decided to let the girl use the library freely even after she returned to Lipzi. After all, humanity was the greatest entertainer of all—so long as she lived, the same tale would not arise twice—and it would be such a shame to let this story wither in the bud.

[Tips] Although the Imperial College of Magic has many locations across the nation, the main campus in Berylin is still considered the peak of scholarship.



Early Summer of the Thirteenth Year

Reputation/Stature

Some systems include values to track reputation earned for various great deeds. These can be used for anything from upgrading a well-worn weapon in certain contexts, to giving it a cool name, or something more useful like acquiring a noble rank or citizenship of a city.

Spring bade us farewell and the pleasant aridity of summer came to greet the capital; by this point, the uproar that had once enveloped the city had vanished without a trace. After dominating the rumors around town and then suddenly appearing in the sky, the aeroship had departed, soaring low enough to nearly scrape the towers littering the skyline to make sure we could all get a good look—but now the excitement had faded, leaving only the usual hubbub of Berylin in its wake.

High society saw a great deal of envoys and diplomats rush out of the country to report what they'd seen to their motherlands, throwing everyone's schedules into disarray. The impact of the vessel's impression had been greater than estimated, and the crown began pumping in even more funding; as a result, ministries and cadres of every kind were fighting to get their cut.

But none of this had anything to do with us common folk. Sure, we were experiencing *some* aftereffects: timber traders had begun to hoard their wood in hopes that the Empire would buy it for its next aeroship, driving up the price of firewood, and overzealous entrepreneurs had brought in so many new workers without vetting that the streets were lined with more people of disreputable character than usual. But for now, we were back to peaceful days.

Back home, my family and friends had finished planting their fields. I lazily walked the afternoon streets, imagining the fun they were having, enjoying a nice steam bath and jumping into the cool stream to wash away their sweat.

Make no mistake, though: I wasn't out on a walk for leisure. Having secured her slothful days filled with nothing but books once more, my employer had suddenly sent me to fetch her some lemonade.

This wasn't exactly a common occurrence, but it happened every

now and again. When Lady Agrippina came across a written description that tickled her sense of hunger or thirst, I was the one that had to go out and find whatever it was that she'd read about. While I understood that this was a privilege held by those who could relegate food and drink to the realm of hobby, being made to run around at her whim was nothing short of a nuisance.

That said, today's request was something I could get my hands on without leaving the city, so it wasn't that bad. There was a world of difference between picking up a tome that required a mental saving throw just to look at and fetching some honey and lemons, after all. Besides, the madam had explicitly asked for a cheap lemonade—I suspected she was reading something featuring a lowborn protagonist—making this an extra easy endeavor.

Both honey and lemons could be found at the local market. The former was a tad daunting for a regular person to purchase, but it was commonly used for various dishes and therefore was sold everywhere. Mead was second only to wine in the imperial drink repertoire; beekeepers could be found in every corner of the Empire.

Had I been tasked with finding tree sap extracted only from the finest shrubbery to sweeten the madam's drink, I would've needed to knock on the door of an esteemed merchant; if she'd demanded the sourest lemons carefully grown by the southern seas, this would've been a herculean task. I was nothing if not thankful that she was happy with the plebeian stuff harvested from who-knows-where—if only *every* errand she sent me on could be this simple.

I bought up the necessary ingredients, stopped by an ice-candy shop for Elisa on the way—our master had given me a silver piece and told me to keep the change, so my purse was nice and heavy—and made my way back to the main road to go home. But when I stepped out of the smaller street, I noticed that there was a sizable crowd clogging the passage.

“Neeews! Get your news heeere! Big announcement from the national assembly! Forty assarii a pop! Hey, you there! Don't pass it around—everyone buys their own!”

The mob was gathered around a newspaper salesman. He was a small jenkins...guy? Wow, was I awful at guessing age when it came to beastly demihumans. Whether he was a boy or man, I could tell from his clothes that he was at least male; anyway, he was shuffling through the crowd to hurriedly dole out his papers.

“Whoa, wait. Seriously? But he looked fine during the parade.”

“Who knows what'll happen next? This'll put the whole country right back into a frenzy!”

“It's one thing after another... We *just* got over the aeroship too. Man, I feel bad for all the poor ambassadors trying to report this stuff

back home.”

“Hey, maybe stirring up confusion abroad is the whole plan. Can’t count anything out with the Bloodless Emperor.”

Scanning the pack of people discussing the news, I saw more confusion than gravity in their expressions; whatever was written must have been incredibly surprising. I was a bit curious, and I still had some change to spare. Maybe buying a newspaper every now and then wasn’t so bad.

The last time I’d read through one had been a lifetime ago. Back then, my involvement at a trading firm had led me to keep up with the four major national publications; though I’d only read those out of obligation, perhaps I might be able to derive some entertainment from the news now that I could lie back and take it in at my own pace.

“Excuse me!” I said. “Give me one copy, mister!”

“Sure thing! Forty assarii—and no change!”

I handed him exactly forty assarii and took the paper in hand. While it was nigh unthinkable to refuse to give change on Earth, most merchants here didn’t carry enough small coinage to guarantee that they could break up their customers’ payments.

“Let’s see what this is all about...” This hadn’t been cheap, so I was going to be upset if the big scoop was unimpressive. But the sheer size of the headline’s typeface proved enough to shock me. “Huh? *Abdication?*”

The salesman’s pitch had been no exaggeration. The Emperor was going to step down from the throne for health-related reasons, even though his term had yet to end; in his place, Martin I of the Erstreich Duchy was to ascend. The national assembly had also announced that the seven electorate houses had unanimously agreed to see the decision through.

Authority in the Trialist Empire of Rhine may have ultimately rested with the Emperor, but the checks held by a small number of voters meant the monarchy was less absolute and more constitutional. Having the Emperor give up his seat in the middle of a term was plenty plausible: a noteworthy political gaffe or hidden scandal on the verge of coming to light had caused several rulers to relinquish their hold on the Empire for “health-related reasons,” as written here.

For example, seven emperors ago, Remus II the Lenient had tarnished the Baden name by letting several historical satellites and allies escape imperial orbit. Mocked in hushed whispers as the Flippant Emperor, he eventually retreated into the shadows to treat his sickness and handed the reins to the Emperor of Restoration, German I of House Graufrock. For those who had been our one and only Emperor, such tactics were the state’s way of protecting their legacy, even if only in name.

However, this didn't seem like a fall from grace.

August IV, the Dragon Rider, was a national hero famed for breaking through the feudal lords who'd blockaded the Eastern Passage. A stern leader in matters of war and state, he was highly regarded by all. I hadn't heard of any recent scandals either. Bastard children and spats with their successors were par for the course in the upper crust, but no such rumors arose; none of his diplomatic mistakes had even been notable enough to circulate around town.

In fact, I would say he was one of the most popular emperors to date. Most country nobodies living in rural cantons would be hard-pressed to recall the name of their local lord, let alone the Emperor. Yet almost everyone knew of the Dragon Rider. While the Second Eastern Conquest had all but finished by the time I'd first come to my senses, those older than me could remember how all sorts of stories came flooding back from the front lines.

But most importantly of all, soldiers had been levied to fight from practically every canton. His Majesty had led the dragon knights to strike at the perfect moment, turning the tides of battle and grasping victory with his mastery of strategy; those who owed their safe return home to the Emperor were sure to extol his virtues. Plus, a victory abroad came with abundant booty, and those who fought had been amply rewarded.

The current Emperor's achievements listed in the paper were as impressive as one might expect. He'd taken the drakes available to him and bred those with the most docile temperaments, giving rise to a new breed that was obedient enough to be used even for nonmilitary purposes. Furthermore, he'd overturned the entirety of the outdated dragon knight doctrine and expanded their scope to dominate the skies; the air superiority afforded by his reforms led to easier victories when it came to battles of counterspells. Not only that, but he established drake stables across the country and coordinated their maintenance by local lords, creating a system that could deploy a dragon knight unit to any location in the Empire in mere days.

Looking at his long list of military accomplishments, one might be tempted to assume he'd come from House Graufrock. But that wasn't to say he left softer matters out to dry: he had a strong record of servicing canals and elongating trade routes to strengthen internal trade. Abroad, he'd won over a handful of satellites to the west, and after showing his military prowess, he'd marched to the small federation near the inland sea to the south—though admittedly, they were imperial vassals in all but name—to negotiate tariff rates that undercut those given to their official most favored nations.

The Emperor had displayed his proficiency as both a general and a statesman. He'd had the support of the politicians working under him,

of course, but it took brains to select which issues to tackle when they came to his desk; he was undoubtedly a genius. While I still had my suspicions about the Emperor of Creation being a kindred spirit, perhaps the Baden bloodline was simply prone to producing all-rounders.

But you know, all these exploits painted a larger-than-life figure. If technological revolution one day brought this world's entertainment up to par with what I'd seen on Earth, he was almost guaranteed to be genderbent in a gacha game. A stern yet beautiful general saddled atop a dragon... What a sight.

My insolent depiction of the sitting Emperor was followed by an unfounded worry for the poor gamers having their wallets sapped dry centuries from now as I entered the atelier. Independent Processing was enough to keep my legs moving while I read, so I wasn't going to run late just because something had caught my eye.

Not that I could concentrate on several unrelated trains of thought like Lady Agrippina, of course. I'd tried once, but it felt *disgusting*. Imagine having your brain run by a council composed entirely of yourselves that sometimes contradicted one another; those one-man arguments had thrown me for such a loop that I'd nearly hurled. It had been the peak of abnegation, like I was subjecting myself to a cultic session of psychological torture. Knowing that it couldn't be good for my mental health, I'd given up instantly—it was hardly any different from looking in the mirror and asking, “Who *are* you?”

Honestly, it was a wonder that methuselah could bear living this way naturally. I supposed that was what made them a superior species, but it also seemed like the reason why so many of them were so deranged.

“I’ve returned, madam...ugh.”

“Ah, welcome back. An errand well done.”

“May I ask where your clothes have gone?”

As I stepped off the elevator with the groceries in hand, I found my master loitering around in an unpresentable state again. Having finished her morning lecture, it seemed she'd partaken in a midday bath; her stark-naked frame was still dripping wet, and her hair especially was tracking water everywhere she walked.

“I wanted to savor a chilled cup of lemonade directly after rising from the tub. What point would there be if I didn't bathe first?”

Casual as ever, she was doing the equivalent of stepping out to the convenience store to look for something that had appeared in a movie. While I understood where she was coming from, being sent on shopping trips like these was seriously disheartening. I wished she'd keep it to a minimum.

That wasn't my only gripe: I had hit puberty, and here she was

flaunting a body that put the magna opera of the finest sculptors to shame, complete with her own set of golden ratios. Yet it didn't have *any* effect on me—I was genuinely beginning to worry about my own condition.

My sense of beauty felt like it had been thrown completely out of whack. My old chum's elegance when not masculine hardly needed to be stated, and my capacity for cuteness had capped out with Margit and my angelic little sister. At this point, when I saw an objectively pretty woman, the best I could muster was an indifferent, "Meh."

As sad as it was to live with sore eyes, overexposure to the appealing came with its own host of problems.

"Interested in the news, are you?"

I'd just come back with a towel to help her put herself back together when the madam pointed out the newspaper sticking out of my pocket. After explaining to her that the we were due for a change in emperors, she curtly remarked that little would change, no matter who wore the imperial crown.

Yes, the bureaucrats of this country held considerable power, and true, she was somewhat involved herself...but would it have been so much to ask that she mince her words the tiniest bit?

"More importantly," Lady Agrippina said, "I'd like you to prepare the drink before the heat of my bath fades. Oh, and is that ice candy you have there?"

"Er, yes, I bought this for Elisa... Will you have some?"

"Hmm. Ice candy *is* particularly delectable after a bath, so perhaps I shall. Bring it over to me along with the lemonade."

Thank goodness I'd seen this coming and picked up a little extra. Just as I started toward the kitchen to prepare her order, the sound of a bell filled the room.

"What's that?" I asked. I'd never heard this sound before. It had a different timbre from the doorbell, and I had no clue what it might signify, but anything that rang clearly through the entire lab had to mean *something*.

My answer came in the form of the sound of leaking air and screeching metal. I turned to the tea table we sometimes used in the corner of the room, and looking closely, noticed a pipe running along the wall that had been painted an unassuming color; it had ejected a small brass can.

Ohh, a pneumatic tube. This was a delivery system that ferried specially made containers across pipes utilizing condensed air and vacuums. On Earth, the British had laid kilometer after kilometer of these pipes in the eighteenth century to facilitate communication between various buildings. Though the invention of telecommunication had put the final nail in its coffin, the technology

was alive and well in the Empire.

Fair enough, I supposed. We may have had thaumograms, voice transfers, and even telepathy, but not everyone could use those means. The most confidential exchanges continued to be put into writing, so this seemed like the perfect solution to deliver a letter to a magus's atelier, especially when so many magia disliked allowing others into their domains.

I tried to fetch the message, but for once, Lady Agrippina summoned her own Unseen Hand to pick the can up herself and quickly opened it to scan the letter. I didn't know this at the time, but these tubes were reserved for official College paperwork—any letter delivered this way was of the utmost importance.

"...I've received a summons from Lady Leizniz," she said.

"A grand invitation indeed," I said. "When will it be?"

"Prepare my clothes."

"What? Right now?"

"As quickly as possible. Tedious chores are best completed with haste. Make it formal, will you?"

"As you will. I will prepare the lemonade at a later time."

"Leave the ice candy here—I'd like to enjoy *something* while I wait, at least. No need to prepare a plate."

I obediently handed her the frozen treats and a spoon, then headed to her bedroom to rifle through her wardrobe. This was a peculiar solicitation. While it wasn't particularly strange for the dean of a cadre to call for one of her members, I didn't see why she'd forgo her usual messenger birds for this overdone method of correspondence.

To convolute matters more, Lady Leizniz actually *enjoyed* maintaining an atmosphere of highborn conduct: her summons usually came days in advance of the date in question. This was a bizarre departure for a woman who always bothered to give a commoner like me three days to adjust my schedule before a fitting. What could possibly be so urgent?

The only thing that came to mind was the imperial succession...but it wasn't as if Lady Agrippina were in a position to visit the palace and support the new Emperor, nor was she well-connected enough to be called upon for her opinion. Considering her misanthropic bent, I couldn't imagine her having ties to anyone in His Majesty's inner ring.

But then what in the world would justify the dean's breakaway from traditional etiquette?

Although my head remained tilted in confusion, I prepared the madam's clothes and turned the sad waste of beauty back into a perfect noble lady.

“I shan’t need an escort, and you are free for the afternoon. Tell Elisa that lecture is canceled.”

“Understood. Shall I prepare your supper?”

“I’m unconvinced I’ll return by evening. You two may eat without me.”

Wow. Not only was she dressed to the nines, but she’d even prepared her *staff*. This was anything but ordinary. The letter that had kicked this matter off had already disappeared—not that I would have dared read it had it been laying around—and I had no ways of seeing through the true intentions of a magus-politician as brilliant as Lady Leizniz, as perverse as she may have been.

As I watched my employer head out, the best I could do was pray: *I really hope this doesn’t turn into another mess.*

[Tips] Pneumatic tubes are a system of infrastructure made to facilitate rapid written communication. They allow important documents to reach their destination without once coming into contact with a third party, making them popular for official orders or summons. Even between two private parties, letters that double as official documents are reproduced, with the copies preserved by the sender and several governmental oversight institutions—they serve the same purpose as certified mail on Earth.

Time winds backward a spell, to a day before the national assembly announced the Emperor’s abdication.

While the Empire had yet to officially change hands, the process was all but complete; the former Emperor had moved out his personal effects to allow His Imperial Majesty to move in. The imperial office was ever so slightly different from the last time these three men had convened here.

The first was August IV. Soon, his title would change to that of a grand duke, and a month after that, rulership of House Baden-Stuttgart would be transferred to his son, leaving him free to retire in peace.

The second was David McConnla von Graufrock. Leader of his house, the duke had been little more than a passive observer in this whole fiasco.

The last of the lot was Martin Werner von Erstreich. He had no scruples about sharing his opinion on the comfort of the opulent chair he occupied—after all, this would be his official seat in a few days’ time, when he would be sworn in for his fourth term as the Bloodless Emperor.

“Welp,” David said, “everything turned out well. Well done all

around.”

“We had the electorates’ approval,” August pointed out. “There was no room for trouble.”

Having completed the paperwork to officiate the proceedings, the pair pulled out a couple of chairs at random and casually took their seats. Truth be told, dealings of emperorship were wholly decided by the imperials and electorates; the privy council and national assembly gave their consent, but only as a formality. So long as the core parties were on the same page, this sort of internal affair would sort itself out eventually.

The werewolf had simply been along for the ride, and showed no signs of fatigue. The mensch had seemingly grown *younger*: his furrowed brow was starting to thaw, and even the wrinkles of age seemed to dissipate. Freedom from the heaviest responsibility known to man had reinvigorated him.

“How *liberated* you two must feel. When I think of the life of torture that awaits, I feel like the world is folding in on me...” Meanwhile, the vampiric Emperor looked more haggard than an unaging and untiring being had any right to. “The talentless runts at home have already started up a commotion, not to mention my mentors and students—I don’t know *how* word got to the College already. I haven’t been to my atelier in half a month!”

As his inauguration drew closer, the leeches wriggling near to help themselves to his authority sucked away more and more of his will to go on. He had a mountain of letters numbering closer to four digits than two, all penned by relatives or acquaintances that shamelessly leveraged their nominal ties to justify contact. Unfortunately, a great many of them held status that demanded basic decorum, eating into the time he would have liked to spend ironing out his succession. Woefully overloaded, he was literally being worked to death—or at least, he *would have* died two or three times over had he not been incapable of it.

“Must suck to have a clan full of aspiring politicians, man. You’ve got my sympathies, Your Majesty.”

“Indeed. Mensch are far from the only ones who lust for power, but those who inherit the riven chalice are particularly ravenous. I shall pray for you from the shadows, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, ‘Your Majesty this,’ ‘Your Majesty that’—how dare you torment me so, you traitors! You bind me to this seat of torture, and for what?! To lackadaisically sip wine in my office?!”

“Treason? You wound me, Your Majesty. And here I visited the yapping electors day in and day out to win them to your side.”

“Verily. I, too, endeavored to fulfill my duty as a loyal retainer, appealing to the national assembly with wholehearted devotion. I

forced these old bones of mine to rise so I could march around the neighboring states and bid them not to squabble at your feet. I am even ready to offer my foolish son for your cause—please, claims of treachery are too much for this aging vassal to bear.”

Though the two retainers’ chitchat over drinks had been enough to draw out the Emperor’s fury, the sly foxes were unfazed; they simply equipped masks of fealty and carried on with humility as eloquent as it was ironic. For a moment, Martin thought to himself that he ought to actually hang them for treason if he could think of an excuse.

However, sharpened tongues were a requirement in patrician spheres; if he popped a blood vessel at mockery of this level, then not even his vampiric regeneration would suffice to keep him alive.

The Emperor quelled his anger with a handful of deep breaths, fixed his posture, and moved on to a question regarding the imperial handoff.

“The national assembly is well and good, but a *foreign* issue still remains. August, how many minor lords did you string along with empty promises?”

“Who knows?” the mensch replied. “Have I not given you all of the confidential briefings to read?”

“What tremendous character you display,” Martin mocked. “Don’t you remember? The details pertaining to the rulers near the Eastern Passage have yet to be set in stone: both the lords whose claims you promised to recognize and the insurrectionists you promised to support. I see that you’ve prepared your spies to do *something*, but I’ve yet to see the final design of your plan.”

“Ahh, *that*... Come to think of it, I had forgotten. Had nothing changed, I had planned to settle the matter next year.”

While Martin had been enjoying a carefree life as a magus, he’d retained a general grasp of the current issues and how his predecessor had moved to solve them. However, during the Second Eastern Conquest that the Dragon Rider was so famed for, the vampire had been too occupied with the matter of military logistics to study up on the details.

The Eastern Passage was a massive international trade route paved by the Conqueror of the East roughly two and a half centuries into imperial history. For roughly 150 years, it served as a highway to import herbs and teas that could only be grown in the east; beautiful silks and dyes that imperial craftsmen couldn’t reproduce; and advanced knowledge in fields like medicine and magecraft.

However, the passage lay on an arid belt, and the various tribes that inhabited the stony desert experienced stark disparities in quality of life—between those that were involved in trade and those that

weren't—leading to instability in the region. To make matters worse, the large empire to the east had fallen into economic disarray because of the overwhelming influx of Rhinian goods. Eventually, the eastern power had colluded with several minor lords in the area to put down proimperial factions and close the trade route.

For a century or so, the Empire lamented the closure of one of its few international trade routes, but a mix of domestic issues and foreign threats kept it too busy to reopen it. That is, until the Dragon Rider took the helm of a stable nation and sought to pave the path once more.

But this time, the goal was different.

The Conqueror of the East had begun his war with the aim of acquiring eastern goods for cheap. In those days, the only imports from those faraway lands had come ferried by fearless traders braving the continental roads; the goods they'd offered had been rare and priceless.

However, Rhine had seen advancements in production capabilities and now had new partners with which to trade. Exotic wares were no longer justification enough. Why then, you might ask, did the Empire go out of its way to start a war over the Eastern Passage?

The Empire required *customers* to whom it could export. International trade blocs had sated domestic consumption, but the nation's impressive manufacturing capacity was left with no one to sell to. Imperial satellites, trusts, and allies were grossly underqualified to serve as buyers; more importantly, their purpose was to offer goods and services that catered to Rhinian demand while acting as buffer states to shield against major threats. The crown could hardly allow an overabundance of imperial exports to ruin their economies and destabilize them.

As such, the leaders of the country looked far and wide for the prime customer their vigorous producers could sell to. Eventually, they settled on the eastern front: the denizens of the east were rich with the gold and silver used in international trade thanks to the region's abundant mines—a point of great envy for the Empire. With how eager their artisans were to off-load their surplus stocks, the ravenous entrepreneurs were sure to bring home mountains of precious metals that would let the nation prosper.

Knowledge of metallurgy was scarce in the arid belt, and the desert dwellers were in constant need of high-quality imperial ironware. A few decades prior, the fledgling empire to the east had begun a new era when its last dynasty fell; they were in need of products only available in the west, and were likely struggling to supply all their people demanded.

Admittedly, the New Empire denied the Old Empire at every turn

in a bid to establish its legitimacy, and had even turned away Rhinian diplomats in the past on account of their bad blood. Still, if a proper connection was established, the statesmen of the Old Empire were sure their eastern counterparts would gladly participate in trade.

So began the Second Eastern Conquest—but it wasn't as if the Empire had *started* with an honest declaration of all-out war. Initially, they'd sneaked spies into the ranks of various desert tribes, promising rewards for a job well done and stirring up chaos in the region.

Promise after promise was made behind the scenes, and countless princes and princesses came to the Empire as hostages, being assimilated into the nation as the grooms and brides of established noble houses.

Now, years after the war, the desert conflict had subsided and trade had begun to flow; demands that the imperial end of the bargain be fulfilled were beginning to mount. But of course, the Empire had never planned to make good on *all* its promises. Allowing a new power to consolidate strength and oppose imperial hegemony would not do, but leaving only a smattering of feeble tribes would plunge the trade route into lawlessness.

What the Empire truly wanted was to pare away all the excess, leaving only the states that made good puppets but could be culled off the map should the situation call for it—it wanted a map drawn for Rhine.

Presently, the borders on that map were only known by August and a select few nobles specializing in foreign policy. Martin had been too busy maintaining their supply lines and subsequently establishing the newly opened trade route to participate. Although the two men shared the same end goal, the new Emperor didn't know which allies his predecessor had prioritized and which he'd forsaken.

"Foremost," August said, "I shall have those involved report to the palace by next week with a more detailed report. The specifics ought to be settled enough that you should need only to give your approval."

"Thank the gods for that," Martin said. "My blood ran cold for a moment imagining that I might have to clean up after your mess."

"Do you truly take me to be *that* irresponsible? I am not so naive as to let those sand-eaters do as they please."

"Well enough... Ugh, if only that were the end of it." Leaving aside how the Emperor reduced the greed-driven wrongdoings of his country to mere paperwork, a gathering of all three imperials was the perfect occasion to clean up yet another chore that Martin had been sitting on. "Oh, and take a look at this, if you would."

"What's this? Hm..." David read aloud, "Imperial ennoblement of a foreign aristocrat?"

"Ahh, I recall you asking about this," August said.

The document Martin had pulled out was exactly as David described: a multicultural nation that placed great emphasis on diplomacy naturally had a long list of exceptional provisions dictating how one might confer peerage on an immigrant noble. In particular, the one the Emperor had selected allowed a highborn woman to join the ranks of the imperial bulwark so long as she had yet to inherit a title abroad.

“It’s been quite some time since this legislation has seen any use, you see. Digging up the paperwork proved onerous. I’d like you both to approve it unless you have any particular exceptions.”

“The hell? Ohh, wait, this isn’t an honorary or unigenerational title, huh? You’re giving out the real deal—full estate and all. No wonder this thing doesn’t get used.”

“This is the first I have seen of it as well. While I signed some writs of property that conferred small parcels of land on foreign kings and the like, not once had this situation arisen.”

“Well, duh. The younger sons of the big houses would start making a fuss if you tried to give a foreigner territory over them. Think about how many properties are under dispute in the Empire. This is a godsdamned luxury.”

Despite serving one and a half terms, this was the former Emperor’s first reading of this law. It was incredibly stringent, requiring all three imperials and over half of the electorate to sign off to make the writing valid. This was a countermeasure against the Emperor selling off imperial land to his friends abroad; though to tell the truth, the rule itself had only been written for posterity’s sake. Over the course of imperial history, every invocation of this legislation could be counted on one hand, and the last occasion had been ages ago.

“I’m not one to talk back if Your Imperial Majesty wills it, but who the hell are you giving it to?”

“A fancied mistress, perhaps? No, never mind. A man so blindly infatuated with his wife and daughter would never bother with another woman... Where do you intend to place this piece?”

“I mentioned previously that I’d need a go-between for my dealings at the College, didn’t I? I figured I could use her there. My original plan was to prop her up as a count palatine, but I can’t exactly justify installing a mere researcher into the position.”

The term “count palatine” referred to a specific role: they were the Emperor’s personal advisors, who offered specialized counsel in their realm of expertise, and were given authority equivalent to that of a count. Originally, the position had been meant to empower trusted confidants; words spoken by an aristocrat invested with befitting authority were sure to carry appropriate weight. It was tradition to

add a prefix to the title in line with the expert's field—in this case, she would be a count thaumapalatine.

Still, even though the original purpose of the position was to legitimize an advisor and keep them by the Emperor's side, awarding this status to someone who lacked rank and title simply would not do. Thus, His Majesty's plan was to honor some great achievement or another with a noble title, and *then* prop her up as a count palatine—just as imperial etiquette demanded.

"In which case," August thought aloud, "you plan to back her ascension to professorship, using the incredible breakthrough of her research to rationalize ennoblement and imperial employment. Hrm... I suppose this is as painless a plan as any could conjure."

Meritocratic to their core, the people of Rhine wouldn't dare question someone's background if they had skill worthy of their stature; this scheme took full advantage of the national zeitgeist. There was certainly a lot of brute force involved, but the raw talent of those involved made it a likelier bet than trying to convince the rest of high society with tricks of relation and nominal ties.

"I've prepared a solid justification as well. She happens to match me in the field of magecraft, if not outstrip me. We discussed the use and development of the aership for a spell, and I learned much from her in that time—with this, none will object to seeing her as an imperial aristocrat."

"Fair enough. Aeronautics are a hot topic right now. So which estate are you handing her?"

"She seems to be *very* talented, so...I think this may be the perfect opportunity to rid ourselves of a thorn in our side."

The Emperor's words drew out an intrigued, "Oh?" from both of his vassals, who sat upright in their chairs. Spats over inheritance and ownership were genuine problems that dictated the ebbs and flows of the entire country; a slapdash response would not do.

Once upon a time, Richard the Creator had picked out 227 esteemed clans to serve as his shield. Though the annals of history had seen that number balloon to four hundred, those who could trace their lineage back to the beginning numbered one hundred and change; the shifts of society had been merciless.

Some families ended when the last ruler failed to produce an heir; others were swallowed up in political mergers; and not a few were crushed under the weight of dastardly conspiracy. Even the most notable clans were not immune. Of the infamous and revered Five Generals, two survived in name only, headed by unrelated scions; only half of the Thirteen Knights that often appeared in epics of early imperial history had direct descendants today.

The fickle nature of succession made it impossible for property

rights to keep up. However, the crown couldn't just let anyone claim unoccupied land, and real estate was not as easy to divide up as leftover candy; there were a lot of unused noble names and territories that had once belonged to them lying around.

Without fail, plenty of bottom-feeders crept up to argue that they and they alone were the one true successor according to some standard of relation or another, but the Empire wasn't going to thoughtlessly tip the balance of power in its own borders. Instead, these unowned lands were granted to His Imperial Majesty as property of the crown until things could be sorted out—noble titles and all.

There were tens of examples of such cases littering the Empire, some of which had gone without arbitration for over a century. Many of these were drowning in bloody conflicts of interest that took place in the shadows, reducing the abandoned estates to nothing more than haunted lands. But if Martin's plan went well, he would be able to have someone else deal with one of them.

"Killing two birds with one stone is great and all," David said, "but I'd accept someone's used underwear before one of those shitholes. Don't you think she'll run if you try and push one onto her?"

"We're talking about a woman who is so fond of Rhine and the College that she left her post as the first daughter to one of the greatest houses in Seine. I doubt she'd be willing to flee the Empire. Besides, while I noticed some faults of her character over the course of our conversation, she wasn't able to hide her underlying responsibility. I have faith that she won't even attempt an escape."

"If you say so." Duke Graufrock put his chin in his hand and went into a deep think, folding in fingers capped with razor-sharp claws as he counted off the possibilities. "In that case, the Ardennes barony, the Jermanus county, or maybe the Lippendrop viscounty..."

"Surely those are too lowly for the cause," Grand Duke Baden cut in. "A more storied house would be for the best."

"Okay, then how's the Stülpnagel barony?"

"I have my reservations about offering a name tied to a treasonous plot... Perhaps things would be different if there were any room for doubt, but appointing her to succeed a baron who was one step shy of regicide will be no more than fodder for the gossips of the inner court."

"Come the fuck on, Gustus! Fine! How about we make her Count Wernigerode, Viscount Roon, or Count Ubiorum?!"

The Emperor had been listening to his two dukes volley back and forth, but a certain name made him clap and cry, "That's it!"

And so, the Empire reclaimed one of its long-lost names: Count Ubiorum would rise to the stage once more. The county was a vast western territory close to the Graufrock duchy that oversaw two

whole districts, and the convoluted bids made by those who wished to rule it had left it neglected for quite some time.

However, the claims of inheritance were only a step shy of sophistry, meaning the rabble could be swept away with a bit of effort. Happy to have another burden off his shoulders, the Emperor merrily penned in the blanks on the form and asked his loyal vassals to sign on the dotted line.

[Tips] Not all territories come with noble names attached. However, the oldest and most storied properties are practically one and the same as the names of those who rule them.

When picturing a magus's laboratory, one might be tempted to imagine walls lined with sickening samples and specimens stuffed into glass vials, complete with a bubbling cauldron in the center of the room, filled with a peculiar concoction of indescribable color.

In reality, they were as diverse as they came. Agrippina had no qualms labeling a chic sunlit nap room her "workshop," and styles of interior decor were as numerous as the magia themselves.

With that in mind, the question arose of how the good Lady Leiniz had chosen to keep her own atelier. After all, her passions were known to be so intense that some regarded her very *being* avant-garde; surely her living space would reflect that.

But no—the place was built in utilitarian fashion, without a hint of her repulsive nature. The floor was a subdued carpet that paired well with the color of the wallpaper, only broken up by a window that let in bright sunlight: an impossible feat, given its secure location far underground. Shelves dedicated to paperwork, pharmaceuticals, and the like were placed in rows on both sides of the room, and they were even carefully sized so as not to tower imposingly over a visitor.

In the corner of her workshop was a complex workstation used for creating catalysts, but it was ordinarily covered with a cloth to deftly avoid any air of stiffness. Great care had gone into making sure that her arcane instruments were put out of sight as much as possible; an unknowing visitor would see nothing more than the office of a respectable noblewoman. Who would ever believe that this was the lair of a bodiless entity clinging to reality, of the embodiment of fright itself, of a *wraith*?

Not only were mages and the undead already typecast into dank caverns abundant with dubious herbs, fungi, and corpses, but she was the leader of the efficiency-driven nutjobs that made up the School of Daybreak. This was clearly too nice a home to be hers.

Even more unbelievably—to those who knew her, at least—there wasn't a single clue pointing to her troublesome "hobby" to be found.

The closest thing would be the handful of understated paintings hanging on the walls, but they were run-of-the-mill portraits of people in formal dress. Any noble knew that a room too drab to facilitate an oil work or two was one tactlessly maintained; it was only natural that one of the Five Great Pillars had put together an office to which she could comfortably invite any sort of company.

Yet while the room was a perfect cutout of her persona as a public official, the atmosphere in it was tense as her disciple came to face the master. Theirs was a relationship that went no further than mutual requests for essay revision, but master and pupil they remained.

When the promising young student had first arrived at the Imperial College, she'd already been an expert in the long-forgotten art of space-bending; still, she respected her superior's position in spite of having learned little directly from her.

"I have arrived at your request, von Leizniz. Whatever might you require from this unworthy student of yours?"

"Now, now, have a seat first. I'm not talented enough a master to let you stand while I sit. Why don't we take things slow and talk over tea?"

"...Very well. Pardon me."

Agrippina planted herself in the chair already prepared at Lady Leizniz's desk, and in turn, the wraith rang a small bell kept by her side. Apparently, she kept at least one student in her apprentices' quarters at any given time, and the sound summoned a pretty young boy dressed in butler's clothing and carrying a kettle.

"Excuse me," he said, setting the table.

The aroma of tea that wafted up from the cup was new to Agrippina. Although she'd seen green or blue leaves used for their novelty before, she'd never encountered this translucent crimson in all her 150 years of life.

"An exotic tea from the east," the dean explained. "They say the leaves can only be grown there, but that the long journey to deliver them to Rhine causes them to ferment into something new."

"A result of the Eastern Passage, I see. What terrific color—as though a ruby has been melted into the pot. Well suited to those with a taste for the ornate, I'm sure."

The methuselah took the cup of what would later be dubbed scarlet tea in a comparison to the popular imperial red tea—though a certain blond child had to constantly swallow back the urge to call it black tea—and the wraith sighed, commenting that it wasn't poisoned.

Having been born to a family not wanting for enemies, the disciple had magically scanned her drink, and the master had taken note. Agrippina had put real effort into hiding her spell, as she wasn't foolish enough to do something so offensive in front of her host. Yet

being discovered only drew out a tempered, “Force of habit.”

Taking a sip, the researcher added, “A tad bitter—perhaps even offensive to some tongues. I doubt a child would enjoy it.”

“I agree. That’s why I’ve given it to you. The flavor is a touch too mature for the little ones, you see. Oh, and they say it causes them trouble sleeping at night.”

“My, thank you for the extraordinary hospitality. Mm... Indeed, there is something in it that stimulates the brain. Would this not be perfect for young students hounded by the threat of a looming deadline?”

“The price is a pinch too high for them, unfortunately. One small jar cost four drachmae. I purchased one out of consideration for my company, but I can hardly advise anyone else to spend so lavishly.”

The spell constantly monitoring Agrippina’s physical condition alerted her to a chemical stimulus in her brain. Having noticed the effects of caffeine, she instantly surmised that it would spread throughout the country like wildfire if a cheaper means of production were ever discovered. One could expect no less from a woman who had once wished for greater pleasures—this was a phase almost all methuselah went through, much like measles in humans—to the extent that she’d magically synthesized narcotics directly in her brain. Her vast experience and acute sensory perception meant that she was quick to notice any bodily change.

That said, methuselah did not need stimulants to stave off sleep. Agrippina was also not fond of the taste; she quickly decided it wasn’t for her and lost interest in the eastern tea.

“I’ve heard that the flavor changes with milk, cream, or salt, if you’re interested.”

“I’m fine, thank you. Ah, but your magnanimous hospitality has reminded me: thank you kindly for introducing me to Professor Erstreich the other day.”

As Agrippina took a silent sip of tea, she cracked open her uncovered right eye. The deep-blue gaze slicing through squinted eyelids made it clear her words were anything but earnest. A normal researcher looking for worldly success would have been happy to offer their sincere gratitude, of course, but the depraved methuselah saw the opportunity as pure inconvenience.

Naturally so. She had settled down at the College solely as a means of fulfilling her life’s purpose: hedonism. That, and because the location suited the logistical needs of the mystic pet project that she planned to pick away at over the next few centuries. Fame and fortune were *not* what she wanted out of Rhine.

Even the blindest observer could see that she wouldn’t have left her motherland at all had she been the type of person to covet

authority. Being the firstborn daughter to an unshakable titan of royal politics would have made getting her way trivial back home.

“It was time wonderfully spent. After all, commanding the attention of such an esteemed character for months at a time is an occasion that seldom shows itself. We taught one another much, and I shall dare say that we have established a splendid bond.”

The precision of Agrippina’s calculatory ability was a cut above the rabble, even amongst methuselah, allowing her to conduct most arcane experiments in her head. When she *did* require real-world data, she had no need for the paltry stipend the College offered to its researchers; her family’s fortune made it seem like a child’s allowance, and that wasn’t even touching on the mounds of money she’d earned from the essays and patents that she’d turned in.

A promotion offered no benefits—only the bondage of duty. She had just enough freedom and just enough privilege in her current position, and the job came with access to a library so vast that it remained questionable whether her eternal life would be enough to read everything in it. Agrippina was already living her dream.

And you’ve created another relationship to sully it, the student’s murderous glare conveyed. But the master simply sat back in her chair with good grace, totally ignoring her bloodlust.

“I’m very pleased to hear that. I knew it was a good idea to acquaint you—a pupil’s glory is a master’s greatest joy. We are all at our best when realizing our potential, don’t you think?”

Lady Lezniz wove the tips of her fingers together, placing them on the desk in front of her, and sat with her legs crossed. Her form was elegance incarnate, perfectly chiseled to incite the boiling kettle of rage she called a student into bubbling over.

This was the art of a woman who had navigated the world of high society, sipping on poisoned teas and exchanging barbed pleasantries to win her flock the distinction of being one of the five greatest in College history. What had she to fear from a baby girl who had spent all 150 years of her life cooped up in her own mind, playing with sorcery and fiction? The esteemed Magdalena von Lezniz was one of the most influential voices in the system and commanded wealth that could buy multiple lesser estates outright; in her eyes, she may as well have been looking at a kitten trying its best to stand every hair on end.

Once upon a time, a young, still-living Magdalena had been lowborn—subject to insult and mockery under the guise of civility time and time again, especially after becoming the youngest mensch professor in College history. No matter how meritocratic the Empire was, the envy of the mediocre was a potent force; a genius of her caliber was used to shouldering the hatred of others.

That also happened to be the root of her current condition, but that is a story for another time.

Every so often, Lady Leizniz's self-made history shined through in a spartan ideology that clashed with her gentle, motherly appearance. She believed in holding nothing back, utilizing one's gifts to their absolute limits to earn fitting prestige and rewards, and contributing to a greater community through that work. Seeing Agrippina champion indolence and only put in real effort when it came to squandering her remarkable talent was too much for the wraith to bear.

Here the dean had hoped that twenty years spent battered by the harsh reality of the world would soften the girl up; the past year since her student's return had proved beyond any doubt that her hopes had been optimistic. Ancient wisdom spoke that the kitten which catches mice shall be the cat which does the same, but Agrippina's impregnable commitment to lethargy almost looped back around to being *impressive*.

Admitting as much, though, would be a slight on her pride. Instead, Lady Leizniz elected to offer her formal signature on a certain document that would put her troubles out of mind.

"From all that you've said," the dean said, "I'm positively sure that you'll be overjoyed to see this, my darling disciple."

"The true matter at hand, I take it? Let me...see?!"

The professor's smile was the peak of grace as she slid a slip of paper across the table; the researcher's standoffish expression nearly plunged into madness when she registered the words written on the front.

It was a letter of recommendation for College professorship.

Professorship at the Imperial College of Magic was not something that one could attain by following a prescribed curriculum. Unlike doctoral certificates, a handful of peer-reviewed dissertations approved by an educational institution were not enough to join the ranks of the most exemplary magia.

Then what *was* the process, you may ask. Simply put, one needed a recommendation from three professors just to be given the *chance* to present their findings to a professoriat that made abattoirs seem merciful: if and only if these elitists accepted the research to be "in service of the pursuit of magecraft" could a magus ascend to join their ranks.

There were thousands of students—both those officially enrolled and those personally apprenticing under magia—across the nation, and the number of ordained researchers surpassed one thousand. But those permitted to don the title of "professor" were capped at two hundred, and the number had not changed in quite some time.

Magistrates across the land funded the education of promising subjects with the hope that one might win the prestigious position, and private mages infatuated with the idea of greatness knocked on the gates constantly; yet the final door was a narrow one, opening only for these privileged few.

Ironically, the severe difficulty of the task drove challengers to prayer. Those steeling themselves for the peer review often half-jokingly invoked the scripture of a foreign land: abandon all hope, ye who enter here. Every year, a handful of bright hopefuls took the podium, only to be beaten down by the razored criticism of the vilest tongues known to man; these were public executions. Despite being only a single sheet of parchment, the invitation felt heavy in Agrippina's hands.

The first backer listed on the page was one Duke Martin Werner von Erstreich. He had once led a subfaction of the largest cadre in the School of Middy, and he had made a career off his eccentric fixation on running along the cutting edge of arcane biology.

Worse, the professor's name occupied another blank on the form, signed on a date that had *yet to come*...on the section reserved for His Majesty's confirmation. This was a silent order: failure would *not* be tolerated. The consequences of betraying the Emperor's expectations within the borders of his Empire needed no further expounding upon.

I've been had! Agrippina immediately pieced together the puzzle that had been put into place without her knowing, and her face drained of all color.

The lack of commotion following her appointment had convinced her that a separate power struggle had diverted attention away from herself; how wrong she had been. They'd been biding their time, tying a net in a place where she couldn't stop them, all to ensnare her before she had a chance to escape.

Holding back the urge to bite her lip, Agrippina snarled in her mind, *How could I have been so stupid as to miss this?!*

Struggling to keep the tempests of her soul from leaking out, she diverted most of her lines of thought to unrelated arithmetic to stifle her emotions. But the flames of fury continued to burn, so she clenched her fist as hard as she could, just out of the wraith's sight.

If Agrippina could've gotten away with it, she would have screamed and tore up her own hair. Rather, her *true* wish was to wipe the satisfied grin off her boss's face with a swift and perfunctory little murder and pretend like none of this ever happened.

Alas, that was an impossible fantasy.

Agrippina had an impartial understanding of her own strength. Twenty years ago, she'd chosen an indefinite exile over no-holds-barred combat, and for good reason. While she was sure she wouldn't

lose—in fact, she was confident the wraith would die—she wouldn't have been able to win cleanly.

Although Lady Leizniz's crafty leadership was undeniable, the reason behind her continued reign was rooted in something simpler: her profound thaumaturgical ability. The depths of her power were unknowable, but it was obvious that she could easily wipe an average city away by herself. If she committed herself to destroying the capital for whatever reason, she would be able to demolish half of it, palace and all, killing countless inhuman magia, knights, and imperial guards in the process.

Agrippina was not arrogant enough to think she would walk away in full health after attacking an opponent who could bind her eternal and impregnable barriers in an ice age's worth of frost. Methuselah were prudent sorts prone to predicting the worst possible scenario before committing to action; her analysis told her that, at minimum, she would sustain irreversible damage to several limbs and vital organs.

So instead, she settled for simulating her vengeance in her mind—but that alone could not quell her rage. Letting out a deep breath, she asked, "May I be permitted a smoke?"

"Oh, feel free. In fact, take your time and enjoy two, or even three."

"Allow me to graciously take you up on your offer."

Stuffing a particularly potent sedative into her pipe, Agrippina took a drag and forcefully muffled her rioting mind. Placidity was key for thought, and she quickly realized that nothing she said now could change the outcome.

The circumstances were perfectly valid. Though Lady Leizniz had promised her a period of reprieve, not even the dean could uphold her oath when given an order from above; attempting to claim that this violated their agreement wouldn't work. This was doubly true because a recommendation to join the professoriat was an honor by most metrics: losing her temper after being recognized would win her no public support.

"The conference at which I'm to present a dissertation is this fall... Am I mistaken in thinking this sort of undertaking ordinarily comes with two to three years of preparation?"

"I would be more than happy to permit you to reuse the treatise you turned in to me on the fundamentals of space-bending magic. Considering how few people in the entire College can make use of the art in daily life, I suspect it will be more than enough."

And besides, the wraith hinted with a sideways glance, I'm sure you have something tucked away for an emergency like this, don't you?

Agrippina had nothing to say in response. She'd been out for

twenty years. No matter how twisted, she was a magus at heart: she would sooner die than claim she hadn't penned a single essay worth showing the world in that time. She could hear a mocking, "Oh? Were you just playing around that whole time?" in her mind, and her pride would not allow for those words to be spoken.

"Yes, indeed... Very well. I shall satisfy your every expectation, O Master of mine."

"Is that so? I'm overjoyed to hear such a spirited answer, and to see my pupil so motivated."

There was only one thing left for her to do. If she couldn't turn back, then she had to press forward, trampling over anything in her path and cutting open her own escape route to freedom.

"Pardon me. I will be taking my leave immediately to begin working on my paper. And the deadline?"

"Let me see... This is a rather urgent matter, so perhaps the end of summer... No, I shall labor to allow you until the beginning of autumn. The others will moan about not having enough time to read your treatise, but the backing of His Imperial Majesty will settle things, I'm sure."

"Understood. I swear to finish by then."

Agrippina smiled, swearing that she would claim a head or two on her way out and make them rue the day they picked this fight. On the surface, her grin was that of a picture-perfect young lady; deep down, her thirst for bloodshed was on the level of the gamblers of Kyushu swinging guns from the ceiling. Whether Lady Leizniz gleaned the truth or not, gods only knew.

"But Master, may I ask you one last thing?"

"...Whatever might it be?"

"This is quite the sudden assignment—some might claim you are asking the impossible. May I take this as your word that you will support me until the very end? For the presentation, and for the correspondence that will follow?"

The adage about desperate times and desperate measures was bandied about to the point of being trite, but it was the truth. Deciding to work those who had placed her in this situation to the bone, Agrippina made her request, pleading for some kind of recompense.

Unspoken yet clear, the girl's will made Lady Leizniz hesitate for a moment, but she couldn't refuse her now; she nodded. Having used her position as the master, she was bound by the obligation to see the part through. Authority was not an almighty trump card devoid of costs: it was a pitch spell that demanded responsibility if it was to be played.

"Thank you very much. Now, if you'll excuse me, time is wasting

away.”

“Do your best. I wish you good fortune, and I’m sure His Majesty will provide...a fitting reward if you manage to impress.”

The methuselah got up, thanked her master for the tea, and left the atelier. As soon as the elevator began to move, the wraith crumpled in her chair with a massive sigh.

“Ugh, that was so tiring... I can only hope this will settle things. I wouldn’t want to leave her to her own devices and let her build another burrow in the library—I refuse to deal with those mountains of complaints ever again.”

Another adage assured that idle hands were the devil’s workshop. If even the most insignificant wretch could stir up mischief if given the time, then who was to say what sort of calamity a person of Agrippina’s misguided talents could cause?

Optimistically hoping that a truckload of work would keep the troublemaker pinned down, Lady Leizniz decided she deserved a reward for cleaning up such a massive problem. Merrily wondering whom she ought to doll up next, the wraith put the painful issue out of her mind, blissfully unaware of the enormous land mine buried under her feet.

[Tips] While talent in magic is exceptionally rare, across the Empire’s massive population the sum total of those who show promise is sizable.

Ill omen had already gripped Agrippina by the time the canned letter arrived. Of course, she was a hardened pragmatist who staunchly refuted the oracular foresight of those spiritual kooks of Shimmering Dawn. Any sense of premonition was merely cognitive recognition of patterns seen before—or at least, such was her conclusion as one of the most logical-minded individuals even amidst the School of Daybreak. Experience planted in the mind inserted itself into the present, giving rise to hallucinations woefully wanting for accuracy.

But this foreboding had been enough for Agrippina to begin the audience with her master with some sense of what might come. Yet not even she could have imagined this worst-of-all-possible-worlds scenario would come to fruition.

“Oh, you’re early, madam.”

Having said in advance that the meeting might take considerable time, the master of the house returned in two hours to a confused servant in the middle of serving tea. Since his afternoon had completely freed up, he must have planned on enjoying some tea with his sister: he was carrying a tray with the cheap cup he customarily

used and the expensive teaware the girl used in her lessons.

“Welcome home, Master. Um, is something the matter?”

The apprentice’s tone was no longer mistakable for something self-taught, and she’d been sitting on the sofa while reading a book. Yet neither the student’s question nor the servant’s subsequent invitation to tea could compel their master to speak: Agrippina quietly walked into the center of the room, where she stood lifeless.

Having been ignored by their master despite her continued presence, the siblings eyed her worriedly for a moment, but eventually decided that it was fine so long as she wasn’t saying anything. They turned their attention back to their respective activities, when...

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!”

...a sudden outburst nearly caused them to drop a set of china worth more than their lives and a rare tome more expensive than several years of tuition.

“What the— Whoa?!”

Taking this unforeseen opportunity, the extravagant teacup attempted to liberate itself from the confines of the serving tray. Leaping through the air, its scheme to metamorphose from a valuable piece of craftsmanship into a smattering of shards that had once been valuable was foiled at the last moment by a rapidly assembled Unseen Hand.

At the same time, the boy had sent another invisible appendage to catch the book. It was reinforced at the corners with steel plates and weighed down further by a precious gem; he couldn’t let it crush his baby sister’s foot.

“Just when I think you’re back,” he grumbled. “What in the world are...”

Shaking off a cold sweat and setting the teaware aside on stable ground, the boy was ready to file a complaint...but trailed off when seeing the state of his employer’s frenzy.

“*Why?!*” she cried. “How could this happen?! Do you have any *idea* how much care I put into keeping this contained?!”

Beauty handcrafted by the gods gnarled as Agrippina clawed at her hair, wrecking the magically set do woven in silver.



The boy feared for his life. Until now, the question of how this methuselah might ever die had been one of the great mysteries of the world; had she ever appeared this distraught before? Her stoic expression warped into one that betrayed world-ending cataclysm, and her limber frame writhed around as if it bore the burden of all the world's injustice.

Forget talking to her—even being around her in this unhinged state was terrifying; the servant abandoned any thought of trying to pacify her instantly. As far as he was concerned, this was verifiably not an occasion in which he had such a luxury. Sticking his nose in would be the last thing he'd ever do: he'd meet a terrible fate if he gave her any excuse to lash out.

“...Hey Elisa, why don't we go for a walk? It's getting warmer out, and the fountain in the plaza has a beautiful flower bed.”

“...That sounds lovely, Dear Brother.”

In a moment of sagacious wisdom, the boy took his sister and prepared to evacuate. Though the girl had undergone great mental change that made her slightly less childish—something a more naive onlooker might call “growth”—as of late, she was frightened enough to squeeze her brother's hand tight as they fled. They knew they might get in trouble later along the line, but who cared? Any amount of scolding was much, *much* more appealing than being burned alive in the flames of their master's rage. Recognizing that it was sometimes best to live to fight another day, the siblings put the laboratory behind them.

Driven to delirium by this turn of misfortune as she was, it wasn't as if Agrippina had failed to account for a potential sponsorship. In her months of excruciating confinement, Professor Erstreich had noted how odd it was that she was still a researcher on several occasions, and remarked about what a shame it was each time. Anticipating a letter of recommendation partnered with someone else at the College had been child's play, and she'd been prepared for the possibility both professionally and emotionally.

The professoriat was the embodiment of concentrated lunacy, formed by distilling a vat of eccentrics to pare away all but the most potent toxins. To join their ranks, one had to earn their approval; a superb treatise had to be paired with impressive practical ability in one of the most difficult exams ever fashioned.

Broken in more ways than one, the members of the crowd conducted their cross-examinations with a rain of questions more pointed than daggered hail. They piled on euphemistic disclaimers of “I apologize for the elementary question, but...” or “As unfamiliar as I am with this field...” More than a few researchers bore unforgettable

trauma that stemmed from their sardonicism.

Perhaps the only factor that *wasn't* actively harmful to the examinee was that repute and character went unquestioned. Admittedly, that was probably also why the body of professors was so rife with people missing the screws, stoppers, and breaks that helped coordinate an average mind, but that was neither here nor there.

More to the point, several people attempted to etch their names into history every year, with the overwhelming majority failing; Agrippina had prepared a means to number among them with a soft landing. If she turned in something that affirmed her capabilities while being just a touch too unpolished, a little over half of the crowd would turn her down with hopes that she might study up and try again in the future—a plan only conceivable by a woman who'd managed to keep the professors of her cadre at bay for years despite flaunting her debauchery for all to see.

If all went well, she would not be made light of, but she would also avoid shouldering undue expectations. From there, she would do the bare minimum to scrape by and put the whole of her efforts into enjoying whatever could keep her interest; that was what it meant to live happily.

Alas, her dream had been brought to the brink of ruin.

To attempt the trial with the backing of the *Emperor* left no room for failure. The petition to apply for a chance to ascend ordinarily took two to three years and enough paper to fill out several volumes of the phone book; all of that had been skipped with the power of the monarch. Even better, the professoriat would be in a most hospitable mood from having their customs disrupted: they would welcome Agrippina with dazzling smiles and overnice comments on her work. Forget splitting hairs; they would begin dissecting the particles of dust on the page.

What more could one expect when some professors were so heinous in character that their annual opportunity to bully wide-eyed researchers trying to prove themselves was the highlight of their whole year? There were so many of these heathens that they had their own little club wherein they merrily discussed across cadre lines to see how they would dismantle the next batch of hopefuls and the work they prided themselves on. It was plainly apparent why the Emperor might look at such antics and lose his temper: why was *this* the only time they could get along?

Regardless, the crown was an entity that fought to rein in the College at every turn. If a researcher bearing His Majesty's favor appeared, there was no question that she would be accommodated with the grandest of receptions.

As the cherry on top, she carried the heavy weight of the

Emperor's expectations. If she "slipped up" here, she would directly damage the authority of the *crown*.

Now, the aristocracy of the Trialist Empire were tolerant folk. Foreign gentry were at times prone to cutting off common tongues at the slightest offense, fully subscribing to the notion that nothing happened for anyone save by the will of the privileged. On the other hand, Rhinian style dictated that one only came into their own when the masses sang insolent tunes in their name.

But this lenience was finite. If Agrippina failed the Emperor after he'd avowed her talents to this degree...

Fear zipped through her body, turning blood to liquid nitrogen. Her high infallible mind churned out a nearly prophetic estimation of the worst-case scenario, and it was so unfathomably terrible that her stomach began to churn. Had she not abandoned the line of thought with haste, she would have shared a heartfelt reunion with the scarlet tea she'd sampled earlier.

Common sense decried the thought of thrusting confidence upon someone and growing angry at their failure; unfortunately, such reason would not prevail. This was a monarchy, and His Majesty's honor was far more valuable than a mere life.

And that damned master of hers—the despicable Lady Leizniz—had mentioned some kind of "reward" that registered as the most disquieting detail of all. Agrippina was sure it was some kind of position, or perhaps even a true noble name greater than the unigenerational titles traditionally awarded to professors.

Peerage in the Trialist Empire was a hereditary government post that primarily defined feudal ownership of estates. However, while these titles were tied to their respective clans, they were also intrinsically linked to the land being ruled. This was why one could sometimes find a Count Something-or-Another of House Whatever lordling over an area as Viscount Something-Else. Strange as it was, it boiled down to the idea that these names served the dual purposes of links to esteemed families and validation of rulership.

Perhaps it was easiest to see with the professors of the Imperial College. They received a noble name and title as part of their honors: those who lacked a family name were either given one by a trusted mentor or had one lost to imperial history revived for them, but they weren't granted an estate despite their noble status. As such, the Empire was awash with noble bureaucrats who held no land at all. For these people, their titles were a symbol of their high rank among public servants.

Furthermore, ties of blood in the Empire were important, but ultimately secondary to sheer skill. With the backing of the Emperor and a few others commanding considerable sway, purity of heritage

ceased to be a matter of importance. Whether the recipient was originally lowborn or simply came from abroad, one would have to be the kind of idiot to turn felon or traitor to be refused a place in high society under these circumstances.

The Emperor of Creation had belabored the point that even the most celebrated families traced their origins to dust; so went the national policy. It followed, then, that someone like Agrippina whose potential had been unearthed—though she hadn't desired to be found—would catch the Emperor's eye as a potential pawn.

In all likelihood, she would likely be given possession of a title embroiled in political strife, and then planted in a position supporting His Majesty on Collegiate matters. Though the former matter had too many possibilities to count, the latter was easy enough to ascertain. The most powerful position she could think of—and ergo the one that would make the most use of her—was that of a count palatine: equipped with the privilege of offering counsel in the palace, she would be *required* to have a better grasp on her field of expertise than the Emperor so that she could make accurate reports to the throne.

"Fine, then."

Agrippina pulled up her disheveled hair and haphazardly pinned it in place with a nearby comb. She pulled out the chair at her forsaken desk and fell into it, yanking out a sheet of parchment and popping the lid on a bottle of ink.

Truthfully, she would have liked to artificially dampen her metabolism and drink herself into a stupor over several bottles of wine. But if her enemies were going to act quickly, then she had to act quicker still; wherever could she find the spare time to waste it drunk, and at what cost?

Agrippina had no interest in making a name for herself, but there was one thing that she could not stand: to be underestimated. Hatred was well and good, disinterest could be reciprocated, and affection was fine so long as it wasn't overbearing—she might even do them the honor of stringing them along to suit her interests. But to be made light of? No, that was intolerable. Belittlement would invariably come back to bite her. People were cruel creatures, and she knew all too well that this was truer still when someone believed themselves superior.

Agrippina refused to let anyone think that she would be a helpful piece in their game. While she wasn't pretentious enough to presume that she ought to be the exploiter in every relationship, she would not stand to be moved around with the ease of a player pushing an ehrengarde piece across a board.

The world was built on the survival of the fittest, and the glorious gilding of culture and morality did nothing to change society at its

core. The upper class had no qualms about using others: the Emperor would happily crush someone else under political stress to move issues off his own plate, and the dean of her cadre was thrilled to offer up a sacrifice from her own flock in a long-awaited act of vengeance that came with social clout. Rather, the noble sphere would commend them as beacons of imperial class.

But when the predator pounced, no law forbade the prey from striking back.

So long as she could shock them to their core while reveling in the last laugh, Agrippina was ready to abandon her slothful ways for the time being. When push came to shove, the only person who could answer for the issues of her own life was herself.

Those who manipulate must always be prepared for the tides of influence to switch course; Agrippina reworked her entire plan for the future, primed to squeeze every last drop of worth out of this “reward” she was to receive. She would use them to cross an item or two off her bucket list—anything less, and her lust for vengeance would not be sated.

As her pen hit the paper, she filled the silent room with a ferocious scribbling: the sound of pure hatred.

[Tips] The rank of count palatine is one of the most prestigious offices one can hold, and is reserved for cabinet ministers who report directly to the Emperor. Experts from every field are entrusted with the duty of advising the monarch on their realm of knowledge. Although modern Emperors employ an average of twenty, this number—and even the scope of their authority—has changed drastically over the course of imperial history.

Some few days had passed since my master had returned tinged with madness, reducing herself to a machine whose sole purpose was to write words on parchment.

Lady Agrippina had said she was busy: lecture was canceled, and I was to do whatever I wished so long as I didn’t bother her. At our master’s order, my sister and I dared not be in her presence, let alone speak in it.

Honestly, anyone willing to ask the madam about what had happened after seeing her like that would have to be just as insane as her. After pulling out prewritten work from suspicious pockets of space, she’d begun working with enough zeal to make her usual slothfulness seem like an act. To say that watching her forgo even the shortest break for sleep or tea in favor of writing was bloodcurdling did the ghastly nature of her endeavor a disservice.

That demon of scholarship made her message with actions, and it rang clear: she would kill anyone who dared obstruct her, including the gods Themselves. A fragile mortal soul like me didn't stand a chance. Instead, we made our best effort every day to not bother her, going so far as to tremble in fear at the thought of our clothes rustling.

"Um... What about...here?"

"Well, Elisa, I don't think it's a *bad* move, but in situations like these—"

"Mika, wait. Wouldn't you say you're being a bit tactless? A player has given it her best attempt to make her move; the path of virtue is to answer not with words, but over the board."

Sorry, I lied. We were taking it easy.

Having left our beloved Konigstuhl behind for reasons wholly outside our control, we siblings had come to learn a lesson about the truth of this world: sometimes you just can't win, so you might as well look for the next best thing.

We weren't going to roll the dice on poking that live demon core with a screwdriver. Following our master's order to just not get in the way without subjecting ourselves to undue grief was the much better option. What could we have done after seeing her like *that*? The risk of derailing her train of thought and drawing her ire meant there wasn't a single argument that could convince us to not live happily estranged from her.

Besides, my employer was the type of person who could fell an elder dragon on her lonesome, but she had looked utterly distressed. Sooner or later, I was certain that she was going to drag me into something absurd.

I figured I might as well make the most of this precious, fleeting moment of peace—so much so that I'd look back on these days in my darkest hour and refuse to die in the name of experiencing such happiness again. This was the best possible course for both my mind and heart.

"But Elisa just learned how all the pieces move. Don't you think we should show her some of the standard tactics and positions first? Being beaten to a pulp by an experienced player without any idea of what's happening is a pretty rough time, you know."

"Yet traditional wisdom dictates that painless lessons are first to be forgotten. Tactics are best learned in the humility of crushing defeat. When I was young, the older pupils at my monastery trained me by first dismantling my play time and time again."

"Uh, I think that speaks more to the people around—er, sorry. Never mind."

So, while Lady Agrippina was busy reclassing herself into a human typewriter, I'd begun inviting my friends to my home in the low

quarter more frequently. Look, I refused to be stuck spending my days next to a room radiating an aura of pure evil. How anyone could exude such intensity just by writing words was beyond me; I couldn't so much as read a book in the parlor in peace. It would've been easier to believe that she was preparing a Great Work hex by herself to curse someone to death.

As such, I found myself savoring a moment worth its weight in gold: time spent playing a game with my sister and friends.

The familiar twelve-by-twelve grid of an ehrengarde board sat between us on the table, and our homemade pieces littered what little space we had left to paint a fun and busy scene. I'd sculpted all of them, and Mika had added a coat of metal and paint on each one; if you ignored everything but our masterpieces, it was almost as if we were in an aristocrat's game room.

"Umm... Was my move really that bad?"

"No, no! It wasn't *bad*, Elisa. It's just that with this situation here —"

"Mika! The analysis can wait for the postmortem!"

"Like I said earlier, Celia, most people can't memorize the exact state of the board across dozens of turns like you and Erich. It wouldn't hurt to be a bit softer on her."

Everyone chatted away like schoolgirls—though my old chum was currently a boy—as we engaged in a board game-esque variant of the traditional game which allowed four players to take part at once. Each player was allowed a mere ten pieces placed in the first three ranks of their side, save for the two files on the left and right ends, and the objective of the game was to keep the emperor safe in a free-for-all scramble.

Though it was most frequently played when several people had to share a single ehrengarde set, making it seem like a reduction of the main variation like hasami shogi was for shogi, or gomoku for go, it actually contained substantial depth. Having double the players meant there were twice as many moves being made, and the possible lines of resulting play were exponentially greater than that.

Battle royales forbade the use of a crown prince and limited major pieces to two per army. Four castles were placed in the center squares of the board, and any player who captured one was allowed to use it. While there was more to think about than in the base game, the chaotic nature of the battles meant it was more important to make flexible decisions than to be familiar with established stratagems.

Furthermore, the leading player was prone to being contained by a makeshift alliance that would inevitably crumble at somebody's betrayal; the human element made it easier to help along inexperienced players like Elisa. After all, I just needed a little

ingenuity to turn my sister's mistake into a sublime tactic.

"Oh, man," Mika groaned. "See? Erich's at it again."

Not wanting to let Elisa's puzzled anxiety continue any longer—she'd let go of her piece, so it was officially my turn—I had my precious knight advance to push up the front lines. Elisa's dragon knight maneuver had skipped past brute force into sacrificial territory, but this one move meant it was now controlling a great deal of space instead.

The current position made evaluating who had the edge in this gambit for the castles impossible. At most, it seemed like Mika was slightly worse off because he'd taken defensive pieces that made it difficult to contest the center.

"This is tough," he said. "I really wanted at least one of the castles. Isn't this a bit much, old pal?"

"You're too soft, old chum. The battlefield is a callous place."

"Talk about double standards. Tell me, General Callous: How much leeway are you planning on giving in this war?"

Enough to fill an attic or two if it means helping Elisa.

"H-How unexpected." Not even Miss Celia—who, by the way, was in her chestnut-haired mensch form to stave off the midday sun—could keep up her usual blitz pace with the chaos of four players. She placed a hand on her chin and murmured, "Hmm, what am I to do?"

Eventually, a nun modeled after a modest priestess marched forward. Its ability to sacrifice itself in place of the piece in front of it emulated a sort of resurrection; she was probably setting up for a later attack. This piece was liable to put the user in a state of disadvantage without proper precautions, but today Miss Celia had abandoned her unga-bunga playstyle. Prepared to play for the long game, I supposed I should've known someone of her skill would find the most vexing spot to set up her nun.

Hrm, it's hard to find a good move... If we failed to contain her advance, the dragon knight waiting in the wings would swoop out along with the empress—I was shocked that she stood by her favorite piece in this nonstandard game—and emperor to plow through the rest of the board.

"This is so hard," Mika groaned. "I didn't realize I was surrounded by tacticians. Ugh, gods..."

But in spite of his grumbling, Mika positioned himself in a way that would let him support Miss Celia's forces from the side. From the looks of things, he planned on being a neutral third party, only committing to the fight after Elisa and I finished our scrap with Miss Celia so he could pick off whatever remained. He was skirting around battle in an attempt to ride the victor's coattails... *You coward!*

"Um, umm... Then maybe I'll do...this?"

Elisa pinched her adventurer and shoved it straight to the front lines after a few seconds of thought. *Wait! Elisa, no!* As much potential as that piece represented, it wasn't very strong on its own. She'd clearly been gunning for the castles in the center, but her defenseless vanguard put me in an awkward spot; now it was my turn to sit and ponder.

"You know, this piece reminds me..."

What's up, Mika? I know small talk in multiplayer games is a classic strategy to divert attention away from your schemes, but don't you think you're being a bit overt?

"Erich will be fourteen this fall. Come winter, I'll be fourteen and Elisa will be..."

"I'll be turning nine."

"Right, nine. And Celia, you were born in spring?"

"Indeed. Many seem to believe my birthday is in the summer, but the truth is I was born in early spring. Why might that be?"

Pure and innocent, yet utterly unstoppable on her quest to live as she pleased, Miss Celia was certainly more reminiscent of the glaring sun of a hot summer day than any other young lady. Frankly, her passions were so fiery that her vampiric weakness to sunlight almost seemed like a mistake.

"We'll be adults next year," Mika went on. "Erich said he wants to be an adventurer, so the piece reminded me of that."

"Yeah," I said, "that's what all this work has been for. This isn't quite how I'd imagined it turning out, though..."

For now, I picked up one of my pieces and moved to support Elisa. Her adventurer was a sitting duck as is, so I defended it to at least threaten a trade if it was taken.

But looking back, I truly had come a long way. My eleven-year-old self earning pocket change and camping in the woods with Margit wouldn't have believed me if I told him how his life would turn out.

"Are you gonna set up in the capital?" Mika asked.

"No way. This place is crawling with the sorts of monsters who take on noble requests—a beginner like me doesn't belong here. I could try finding a party to take me in, but I'm sure they'd all shoo me away at the door."

"Uh... I don't know about that."

While Berylin did have its own branch of the Adventurer's Association, those who posted up here were invariably the cream of the crop, ready to take on big jobs from patrician patrons. Overrun by maxed-out PCs, my old tablemates would have laughed that this place was perennially one step shy of turning into the ruins seen in kaiju films.

I'd heard rumors of warriors as strong as any jager; mages who

could be magia if they ever bothered to write an essay; virtuous lay priests blessed with incredibly powerful miracles; and scouts clever enough to unearth historical documents without leaving so much as a crease in the paper. Anyone who could make a living here was the kind of person a noble would want to hire for their exclusive use.

On the other hand, there were few to no quests aimed at novices. Dangerous beasts and monsters would never be found around the capital, and the apothecaries of the city weren't charitable enough to pay someone else to pick herbs in a forest right next door. An entire office full of strong and dependable bodyguards existed for those who needed protection, and lost items or persons could be found by one of the many specialists in the Mages' Corridor. While not everyone could afford the help of a magus, the capital had an abundance of people willing to work for a bit of change; if one misplaced something or had a pet run away, it was cheapest to find one of the do-it-all handymen that littered the city.

With all this in mind, beginner quests were a scarce resource in Berylin. This was basically a new area in an MMO's expansion that bumped up the level cap for veteran players. Loitering around as the equivalent of a free-to-play noob would get me told to go home at best; no one was going to bother wasting their time helping me grind up to their level. Rather, this world lacked the convenient ability to get stronger by watching others fight from the sidelines; the requirement to put oneself on the line caused the entire premise to crumble. No one would know hardship if hugging the backs of those who came before could suffice.

All this to say I needed to go somewhere more rural to find work as an adventurer.

"Even if an experienced group is looking for new recruits, I'm sure they'll still have a baseline for what they're willing to accept. They won't even let me carry their bags until I have a bit more to my name."

"Personally, I think you'd be set if you showed them a flourish of your sword. Undue humility will come off as sarcasm, you know."

"You're too kind to me, old chum. I know I'm not *weak*, but I'm still inexperienced. I've already learned my lesson that I still have a ways to go. Remember the ichor maze? The world is full of geniuses who'd beat me in a fair fight."

The undead adventurer from whom I'd inherited the Craving Blade had been incredibly strong. Even with Mika's support, I'd barely managed to squeeze out a miraculous victory on the brink of death—and there were plenty more like him to come.

Besides, I was painfully aware of how many people could kill me off on a whim. While my employer and her vitality-glorifying boss

topped the list, the crazy masked vampire I'd run into recently had driven home how prevalent people of their strength were. I wanted to start my journey somewhere more realistic.

"You wish to be an adventurer, Erich?" Miss Celia asked. "I'd been under the impression that you planned to continue serving a noble house as a knight or retainer."

"Adventuring has always been my plan. Servitude and knighthood don't quite suit me. More importantly, this has been my dream since I was a little boy."

"Do you have someplace specific in mind to start?" Her follow-up question was accompanied by yet another sickening move. "If you find yourself in the south, my aunt may be able to put in a good word for you. When I last spoke with her, she mentioned that she invited adventurers to her estate now and again to turn their tales into plays."

"I still haven't decided on that front. I'd initially planned to start near my hometown, but my situation has changed a great deal."

I was embarrassed to admit that my plans were still up in the air. The original arrangement Margit and I had come up with had been to set up in the nearby city of Innenstadt to skimp out on expenses. That way, we could go home to rest without paying rent if we needed to, and we'd be able to help out during the harvest. From there, we'd go to town to sell produce and trade for goods used as taxes; we wouldn't want for work and could still help our families.

However, the more jobs I took from the College's bulletin board, the less fulfilling that lifestyle began to sound. It was just so...*safe*—like we had some sort of insurance. I'd begun to feel like it wasn't adventurous enough.

In more modern terms, it was akin to starting a band while still living at home and working part-time at the family store. Even if things didn't pan out, the option to give up and inherit the family business was constantly in the background.

Of course, that was a very prudent and highly respectable decision, but it was *wrong* to do the same when committing to a line of work as fueled by romance as adventuring—or at least, the phantom voices of the characters living on in my heart whispered as much to me.

Margit would understand—probably. She didn't seem opposed to the idea of a riskier venture; in fact, she'd tersely noted that it wouldn't "feel as though much would change" when I'd first suggested basing our operations in Innenstadt.

Maybe the best place to start would be somewhere far away, in a land rife with conflict and brimming with odd jobs.

"Settling down in one place to make a name for myself might be nice, but wandering across borders to find prestigious work is

appealing too—just like in the sagas.”

“You truly are infatuated with adventure, aren’t you?” Miss Celia’s giggle was as genteel as ever, but it clashed too heavily with her ruthless play to appreciate. “Then perhaps I might be the wayfaring priestess to help you along the way. Dedicating myself to faith without the support of a church piques my interest, and I’m sure you would supply me plenty of opportunities to help the needy.”

“Ha ha, then maybe I’ll join Erich too when I go on my tour of the land. The School of First Light has a tradition of sorts where I’m supposed to experience the greater world, so why not take part in your adventure while I’m at it? No saga can be complete without the friendly mage to open the hero’s path: whether you face a broken bridge or a towering cliff, I shall fashion thee a road of flowers upon which to walk.”

Boy, that sounds like fun. A well-to-do young lady like Miss Celia becoming a lay priestess was as dubious as someone of Mika’s promise having enough time to fit in a whole adventure on his scholastic trips; but if it ever did come true, we would certainly have a wonderful time.

Best of all, our party composition would *rock*.

I was a vanguard who could use magic; Margit was a scout who could come up to the front line as a dodge tank if push came to shove; Mika was a magus who excelled at both supporting and debuffing; and Miss Celia was a nun equipped with healing miracles whose blue blood and noble mannerisms would be a lifesaver in negotiations. Put together, our party would be a wonderful one.

Admittedly, I would’ve liked a beefy tank or a glass-cannon mage to round things out. I was the only primary damage dealer in our current setup, and I lacked both all-purpose firepower and the ability to take hits for my back line. Although I was confident about initiating, closing out fights was another story.

“M-Me too! I’m going too, Dear Brother! I’ll get so strong that Master will let me go—promise!”

Our merry fantasy of a future that would probably never come got Elisa excited as well. She leapt to her feet with a raised hand—I picked up the board with an Unseen Hand so the pieces wouldn’t fall over—and frantically grabbed our attention so we wouldn’t forget her.

“Sure,” I said, “you can come too, Elisa. Everyone will feel extra secure with two magia by our side.”

“Hey now,” Mika said. “Not counting your own magic, Erich? This party of ours is going to be the height of luxury.”

“Please. My spells are basically just party tricks.”

“You sure go to some brutal parties...”

We continued the fun chitchat about what might be to come until

just before evening, when our battle royale ended in Elisa's victory. At the very end, I'd been left with only an emperor to three of Elisa's pieces—a close battle by any metric.

"Augh, I actually started to sweat from thinking so hard," Mika said. "Gods, Erich, how overprotective can you get?"

"What are you on about? Frankly, I'm moved by the discovery that my sister had been a strategic genius all this time."

"Well then, shall we begin the postmortem?"

"No, hold on, Miss Celia." Analysis was well and good, but my old chum and baby sister had worked up decent sweats from the early summer heat. Not wanting them to risk a heat rash, I instead invited everyone to the baths.

"Hmm," Miss Celia grumbled. "But this is such a wonderful chance to discuss the match..."

"That's fair," Mika said, "but we can always save that for next time. Right?"

"Yeah. Plus, the baths should be empty around this time, and we'll get to be the first ones to enjoy the water. I'm sure it'll feel great."

"That sounds nice, Dear Brother. Master's tub is lovely, but the larger baths feel wonderful every so often."

Though Miss Celia remained a bit hung up on the postmortem, she recognized that she was alone and deferred to group opinion. Off the four of us went, perfectly split with two boys and two girls.

[Tips] Ehrengarde battle royales—simply dubbed off-games in some regions—are an unorthodox way of playing the popular board game. Four players participate, each with ten pieces; a player loses when their emperor is captured.

Other than these basic points, there are plenty of extra rules that change by region—the first player being decided by age or by dice, and the like—and the game is therefore infamous for causing fights between people whose hometowns are far apart.

Nothing could quite describe the joy brought by a cool glass of citrus water after a long, steamy bath.

"Ahh... That hits the spot."

If only we could have a bit of ice clinking in the cup, I thought as I returned my emptied glass to the vendor. We didn't have refrigerators, let alone ice makers; floating ice cubes in one's drink was an unimaginable luxury. Magecraft offered a possible solution, but no one wanted to waste that much mana on something like this.

"It sure does." After gulping down his drink, Mika wiped his mouth with his bare forearm and returned the cup, just like me.

We found ourselves in a public bathhouse that was a smidge more

expensive than the average establishment, complete with cleaner and overall better facilities. The baths themselves were notably larger than the cheapest places in town, and the large steam bath got hot enough to suit my tastes; there was even an interior garden to relax or exercise in, so the satisfaction was well worth the price. We could never have dragged Miss Celia out to the crown's free-to-enter locations, and had chosen a more suitable location with more respectable patrons.

Rhine lacked any culture of mixed bathing, so naturally the other two had gone over to the women's bath. Truth be told, children under the age of ten were permitted to follow their guardians to either side; Elisa had wanted to come with us, but it wouldn't do to leave Miss Celia all by herself, so I had my sister join her.

On our end, Mika and I were taking a quick break after our third round of bouncing between the steam and cold water baths. Having recently gotten over his public bathing fears, my old chum had begun to join me—except when feminine, obviously—and we found that our tastes in bathing matched up nicely.

That said, he *did* sometimes mutter about how it “could be hotter” even when I was feeling comfortable. The sauna had been hot enough for an average Berylin native to think twice about entering; how hot did the people of the north make their baths?

Hidden only by a towel around his waist, Mika's shoulders were broader and his pecs manlier than when agender. Something about his mannerisms made his bare frame strangely captivating, even as a fellow guy. He stared off at some of the other customers wrestling out in the yard and ran his fingers through the strong curls of his raven hair with a deep breath. Closing his eyes, he seemed to be savoring the blissful feeling of his drink soaking into every corner of his body to quench his thirst.

The courtyard bench was built in the style of stairs, and the faint red of sunset trickled down on us through the leaves of the tree above. This moment was one we could only enjoy as two children free from the chain of midday work; we took in the clear summer day in all its glory.

“And?” Mika asked with a sideways glance. “Tell me the truth. How's it going?”

“...You know, it really isn't all that bad.”

My employer, still a waste of beauty, now *also* doubled as a typewriter in what I could only describe as a terrifying evolution, but I was convinced she was just paying her dues for all the trouble she'd caused. Bluntly put, it served her right, and I was here to laugh at her; I wouldn't even mind slinging my sides into orbit.

Not that I had the nerve to say that to her, of course.

Schadenfreude aside, I'd spoken to Lady Agrippina before her descent into madness: I was to be freed from my position as servant as soon as Elisa officially enrolled as a College student. Now that Elisa had a patron to cover her expenses, I no longer had any need to toil to earn them.

Ours had been a logical partnership that arose out of necessity. Though the contract never specified my term, it wasn't indefinite either, and had clearly laid out what the value of my work would be in relation to my sister's tuition. With an alternate means of supplying that money, the excuse for my servitude crumbled away, and our agreement naturally came to an end.

However, Elisa would not be able to leave Lady Agrippina's side until the risk of accidental catastrophe dropped to zero—that is, until the College deemed that she was perfectly in control of her powers. This barrier was set in stone, and proved a high hurdle at that. According to the madam, enrollment was an unrealistic stopping point: she would need to be an ordained researcher before she could win her freedom.

No matter how brilliant Elisa was, the Imperial College of Magic did not offer easy paths of promotion. This wasn't a sword school of Edo Japan where a monetary initiation was enough to sell a samurai's name; while not as bad as the path to professorship, the process of going from student to magus was strenuous. Plenty of people dropped out of the institution, unable to rise to the occasion, and I'd heard of fifty-year-olds who'd stuck it out and only just attained the title.

Assuming Elisa matched the youngest mensch to ever become a magus, she would still be fifteen. Lady Agrippina had told me to expect another seven years before she was independent.

But there was something that scared me.

The day I'd awoken from that night of sheer chaos, Elisa had begun bawling as soon as we were alone together. She'd clung to me in a fit of tears, but it had been so sudden that I hadn't understood what was going on.

Carefully deciphering the words heaved in between sobs, I made out that she had *seen* the wounds fixed by the power of the Goddess—that she understood how much pain I had experienced. While we'd been with Mika and Miss Celia, she'd done her best to hold it in, and the joy of seeing me safe had managed to win out. But she'd seen a nightmare: one of a world in which I didn't come home.

And so, she began to speak.

"I know that I can't stop you from doing dangerous things. I know that no matter how much I beg and beg and beg, you'll go anyway. So I'll do my best too. I'll learn more magic. I'll become so strong that I can stand by your side and make sure nothing hurts you again. Then

you won't ever be in danger. Isn't that right, Dear Brother?"

The wet eyes buried in my stomach peeked up, staring at me not with our father's deep amber, but with a perilous golden glow that clung fast to my mind. Two dreadful moons had appeared on her lovable, cherubic face, and it filled me with an unspeakable uncertainty that brought me to the cusp of crying out.

I squeezed her tight. Was I trying to keep the trembling little girl in my arms the way she was? Or was I simply denying a terrible delusion of my own concoction? Unable to explain my ridiculous emotions, I just held Elisa as tightly as I could.

"I'll get stronger," she whispered. "So don't leave me behind, Dear Brother."

Her words resounded in my head like the bells of a cathedral, their echoes refusing to leave well after she fell asleep in my arms.

Elisa had steadily been growing up, but the next day, I felt as though she had matured overnight. Where until now her psyche had barely managed to catch up to her body, she suddenly seemed developed for her age. Her mannerisms were more refined, and her palatial speech was approaching the precision of a true aristocrat.

But most of all, her little "game" of making scented pouches leaked out enough mana that even I could tell with my untrained eyes: she had incomparably more power than me. Yes, she was a changeling, destined to dance with ambiguous magical concepts on a level more intimate than anything we mensch would ever know. Yes, I had known from the start that she would one day eclipse the bounds of her mensch frame with capacity for mana beyond the strongest among us... But by *this* much?

Although she was still far from the ludicrous heights of Ladies Agrippina or Leizniz, she had already surpassed my limits with ease. Thinking about what the future had in store made me nauseous enough to feel my legs melt into a sea of nothingness.

And so, I'd decided to stay. Elisa had told me I could go on ahead, but I'd made up my mind to remain as Lady Agrippina's servant until she was officially enrolled.

Some said the heart was weakest when it appeared most unwavering. Emotional distress beyond a certain point could very well manifest in physical ways. I was merely fulfilling my wish as an older brother. I would stay until the day Lady Agrippina recognized her fundamental schooling and deemed her worthy of taking the first step toward becoming a magus—until I could be sure that she would be okay without me.

"And? How about on your end?"

"Me? Uhh..."

But I couldn't bring myself to talk about all this. Instead, I turned

the question back on Mika, who groaned in contemplation for a moment before placing his head on my shoulder.

“Tired?” I asked.

“...Yeah. Working every day while studying is every bit as hard as everyone makes it out to be. Sir Feige’s reward and the ehrengarde pieces helped out a lot, but it’s still tough.”

Despite having the support of his local magistrate, it sounded like my old chum was barely scraping by. His scholarship came with lodging in the low quarter, so he didn’t have to worry about rent or tuition, but every other expense was on him.

Neither food nor clothing were cheap, not to mention the catalysts he had to procure each and every time he had an experiment to run. I tried my best to lend a hand on that front, but synthesizing your own was orders of magnitude more work than simply buying them. But considering how much arcane ingredients cost, his only means of affording them was to work on job-bulletin tasks anyway.

The more time he spent earning coin, the less he had to keep up with his studies. That his efforts to get by only pushed away his final goal of becoming a magus was the sad reality of a self-supporting student. He’d have a workshop and stipend as soon as he became a researcher, but the road ahead was treacherous.

On average, a College student took five years to graduate. However, after correcting for outliers based on racial affinity for magecraft and taking the median instead, most ended up needing seven years, give or take.

In terms of climbing a famous mountain, Mika wasn’t even at the fifth station on the trail yet—the depths of scholarship that sorcery offered were readily apparent. Seeing my friend’s struggle, I could understand why some magia described their craft as the lofty pursuit of approaching divinity.

I’d invited him today hoping that this might be a nice change of pace, and thank the gods I had with how fatigued he looked. Our piece-making business had netted more profit than some of the odd jobs on the bulletin too—a bit more than the sewer rounds, even—so I was happy that I could lessen the load on his plate.

“I think it’s because my master noted my growth, but my homework has gotten *really* hard lately.”

“That bad?”

“Yeah. He said now that I have a good grasp of the theory, I need to pick up the pace and focus on practical skills. I’m on a completely different routine now... I mean, I knew our line of work took a ton of practice, but still.”

Born in the arctic north, my old chum’s skin was always tantalizingly fair, but today it seemed paler than usual. While he’d had

a healthy flush after warming up in the sauna, it had dissipated during our extended break to reveal skin white enough to betray his dearth of mana.

“Make a thing, break it, and repeat. It’s *draining*, and not just in the magical sense either. It’s really getting to my head... There’s this sense of pointlessness to it all, you know?”

I asked him to elaborate, and discovered that his training boiled down to digging a hole so that he could fill it with dirt—he was just shy of participating in campsite activities, and certainly not of the fun variety.

The hole digging was a bit of a hyperbole, but he was tasked with crafting precise miniature buildings, only to have to witness them being blown away by similarly scaled-down disasters. I was willing to bet the mental strain was similar.

Alas, it came with the territory. Monotony was an oikodomurge’s lifelong companion: buildings could not stand without solid foundations, and no great feat of architecture could be made while neglecting the fundamentals. Mika’s master had doled out an exceptionally boring and exhausting task in order to mold him into a great magus, but judging from his awful complexion, the triple burden of mana depletion, work, and daily chores was seriously weighing on him.

“Day in and day out I build a thing and break it. It’s so depressing. When I mess up during construction, he tears the thing down right then and there—and if that wasn’t enough, he’ll tell me how many people would have died because of my mistake too...”

Mika let out a weary sigh. His eyes had been positively twinkling while playing ehrengarde, but now the light there had gone on holiday.

“I mean, I know he’s not doing it to be mean. People will live in the buildings I make and walk across the roads I pave, and I know he’s just trying to drill in the lesson that I can’t ever mess up.” Nestling into my shoulder, he sadly said, “But it hurts.”

Far from home and with few people to rely on, maybe he was unconsciously acting spoiled around me. Figuring that a little skinship amongst boys wouldn’t hurt, I put my hand on his head, and he happily nuzzled up against my palm. I ran my fingers through his hair and rubbed his forehead; when my palm slid onto his cheek, he let out a gratified sigh.

This was, well... He was just as aesthetically blessed now as when he was agender, and my heart was starting to pound. This was bad—as accepting as I was of these sorts of inclinations, I didn’t recall taking any such traits myself.

“You’re so nice,” Mika whispered.

Trying to divert the course of his emotional comment, I proposed an idea. If I let this atmosphere linger any longer, I risked lapsing into a gruesome social fatality.

“Then maybe my new hobby might come in handy. Want to come over to my place for dinner from now on?”

“Huh?”

Driven by desperation as it was, my proposal was a consequence of my continued growth. Completing the Miss Celia’s Family Troubles Campaign—why yes, I did make that up—had come with a massive reward of experience, and the litany of possible ways to spend it all had given me a lot to think about.

My first purchases ended up realizing my longtime dream of Divine Favor in Dexterity and Divine Hybrid Sword Arts. The pinnacle of mastery, Scale IX was said to only be achievable by those born blessed by the gods, requiring long years of dedication to bring that talent to fruition.

My reasoning for maxing out my Dexterity was its wide array of use cases, and that it was my best avenue to continue abusing Enchanting Artistry combos. Swordplay was heavily reliant on skill, and no other trait offered the same level of absurd synergy as this. Where an ordinary accuracy check would be based on both Agility and Dexterity, I could trim the fat to base my hit rate off two instances of my *Scale IX* Dexterity instead. And whenever I landed a hit, I could swap out my Strength bonuses too; I was effectively reaping the rewards of having *three* maxed-out stats instead of one.

Of course, I still needed enough Strength to swing my sword and enough Agility to keep up with my enemies, but the resulting damage output made it obvious that this was the most efficient way I could spend my experience. Fixed values were king; nothing could be more important than bumping up my damage floor. These freebies were my guardian angels that would protect me from any misfortune, barring a fumble. All hail fixed values!

My unyielding faith in Lord Mace had me clasping my hands in a peculiar act of prayer for a moment, but my commitment to consistency was perfectly normal. I was the personification of lucklessness, and as far as I could tell, it seemed like the world rolled dice based on my stats to determine how I fared; if that held true, fixed values were the path of righteousness.

With two long-dreamt-of goals completed, I was one step closer to my ideal form. However, I still had experience to spare; I bumped up my Mana Capacity by one from plain Good to VI: Superb in order to augment my staying power. Throwing out spells at every turn both offensively and defensively made me prone to running out of gas, meaning campaigns with plenty of hallway fights—like the

adventurer's ichor maze—posed a serious threat. Knowing that I'd go on extended trips and might even use magic in the city once I set off on my own, I figured shoring up this weakness was a good choice.

As an aside, I held off on touching Mana *Output*, since I didn't plan on using big, expensive spells anytime soon. I'd have to dip into it eventually if I ever wanted to ferry around cargo or people with space-bending magic, but that was a problem for another time.

Even after that, I still had more to spare—a testament to how unbelievably strong that masked weirdo had been—so I racked my brain and finally settled on picking up a handful of camping skills.

I took cheap abilities like Campfire Cooking, Culinary Knowledge, and Portioned Seasoning at an III: Apprentice level. Despite being inexpensive enough that I could pay off the costs through my daily routine, activating all of them at once arguably produced better results than any one of them could with more investment.

This was a trick I'd used plenty of times in my beloved tabletop games, but it was pretty difficult to pull off. Systems that encouraged the player to find synergistic combinations of skills and traits oftentimes made it cheaper to level up a preacquired skill than to spec into a new one.

My blessing was no different, and looking at the cost of picking up a skill alone would suggest that more dedicated investment was the better choice. That said, there was inevitably a boundary at which greater gains were achieved by spending experience points to diversify one's build, and that boundary was especially clear when higher levels cost more than their earlier counterparts. The gap between a player who kept this concept in mind and one who didn't would be immediately noticeable in their characters' strength; navigating the optimal path was what separated the novices from the veterans.

I calculated things out with that in mind to come up with the ideal build for making simple yet tasty dishes. So long as I could get my hands on a few ingredients, I was confident I could whip up meals on the road that outstripped even the ready-to-eat rations provided by the US Army.

And so my shopping spree ended with these wayfaring skills.

For those curious, my pubescent body *almost* convinced me to waste a great deal of precious experience on worthless skills, but I mobilized my rationality in time to counter it. Youth is such a terrifying thing.

...Though I was willing to reconsider down the line if my purse was feeling heavy.

To get back to the matter at hand, my recent acquisition of cooking skills had really gotten me hooked on the culinary arts. Even after “learning” a skill, I still had to go through the motions to get a

hang of it; I'd been buying up cheap ingredients at the local market to experiment with all sorts of recipes.

As a result, the Ashen Fraulein was in a bit of a sour mood, and she took it out on my hair every single morning. Today, I'd awoken to find it tightly set in a chignon and had struggled to undo it—I was *not* going to walk around matching with the madam—but the daily new discoveries and trickling influx of experience points made cooking fun and rewarding.

One such discovery was that cooking for one was really inefficient; so why not make a bit more for my friend and help him with his chores?

“Are you sure?” Mika asked.

“Of course I'm sure. In fact, I was planning on inviting all of you after we got out of the bath. I can help you with your laundry and cleaning if you want too. I've been getting into that sort of thing lately.”

I puffed up my chest to seem as dependable as I could. My old chum stammered a bit, trying to find the right words, but he was failing his speech check hard. Eventually, he missed a mental saving throw and gave in with a quiet, “Please.”

“Leave it to me. Let's stop by the market after we leave. Allow me to serve you a supper made with only the freshest of ingredients.”

“...I was *this* close to accidentally calling you ‘mom.’”

“Come on, at least make it ‘dad’ instead.”

“Mmm,” he mumbled. “But seeing you from behind makes it kind of hard to...”

“Huh? What?”

“No, forget I said anything. What are you planning on making, anyway?”

I won't pretend I wasn't curious about why he suddenly changed the topic, but I didn't want to be the kind of friend who pushed harder after being told not to prod. We weren't playing a board game built around picking apart lies or anything, so I joined him in talking about dinner.

But what *would* I make? It all depended on whatever was cheapest at the market, but the cost of spices really limited my options. I could finally empathize with my mother's struggle; back in Konigstuhl, she would sing little verses about spending time and effort in lieu of money whenever she prepared our meals in the kitchen. I had a few extra herbs that I'd picked while I was out on a College mission, so hopefully that would be enough to make one solid dish.

Thrilled by the thought of a homemade meal, Mika perked up and we went for another two rounds each of the steam and cold water baths. After rinsing off our sweat, we headed out to find that we'd

kept the ladies waiting for quite a while.

I offered to treat them to dinner as an apology, and Elisa happily jumped up for a hug. However, while Miss Celia initially smiled with excitement, her expression quickly dampened to the point where even an outside observer could flag her disappointment. Drooping at the shoulders, the priestess explained that she volunteered with the rest of her cloister at a soup kitchen in the evenings.

Come to think of it, she'd mentioned the other day that her aunt was leaving for Lipzi, and that she'd moved into the Great Chapel. Being just one among many nuns, it wouldn't do to just skip out on her charitable service.

We saw Miss Celia off as she turned back to wave again and again, and all three of us shared the same thought: *Let's all have dinner together again soon.*

Next time, I swore, I'll make sure she's free to join us.

[Tips] Although the capital does not have slums, the presence of low-income persons is unavoidable. Those who work laborious, physical jobs, and those whose income is sporadic and irregular often rely on soup kitchens run by various religious institutions around town. They primarily offer frugal meals of porridge and black bread broken up by the occasional donation of pickled foods; still, a free meal is something that most are incredibly thankful to have.

Master Scene

Master Scene

A scene without PCs run entirely by the GM, most often used to explain the backdrop of an upcoming session or to give a glimpse into the lives of the NPCs of the world—friends and foes alike—in the aftermath of a completed adventure.

The Trialist Empire of Rhine was home to many noble houses, and among the names that made up His Majesty's trusted bulwark was one Count Ubiorum.

In the days preceding imperial hegemony, militaristic clans had littered the warring states, and the original Ubiorum had been a man blessed with a keen eye and decisiveness of action. Even before Richard's exploits had earned him the epithet of Little Conqueror, the shrewd general had come to the future Emperor's court to offer his sword...with the heads of his irresolute king and royal retainers as proof of his fealty.

Those accustomed to modern sensibilities would decry such an atrocity for its blatant treachery, but the era had been one of war where symbiotic reciprocity was paramount; Count Ubiorum's actions had been a matter of course. Rather, the perceptions in those days would have placed the blame on the victim, for the fallen king had squandered his opportunity to make use of his talented vassals and paid a fitting price.

Having assessed that the future of the region would revolve around Richard, Ubiorum committed the whole of his efforts to the Emperor of Creation's cause, assisting greatly in the foundation of the Empire. His remarkable contributions earned him the title of "count," just shy of the authority given to the electorate, and he was given control of both the Ubiorum—that is, his original lands—and Duren administrative states.

The first Count Ubiorum had remained in service as His Majesty's sword, earning great valor for his accomplishments, but that was history long since buried. The last of his legitimate successors had fallen several generations ago, and the vast expanses of land overseen by the county had been reclaimed by the Emperor—most of those living within its borders had all but forgotten the name.

All things must pass; that which flows must certainly ebb; the

fairest among us shall no doubt fade. Transience was an inevitable companion of the warrior class, but this conclusion was a particularly woeful tale.

House Ubiorum was a lineage of *mensh*, prone to frequent changing of the guard. The dizzying pace of twenty-five-year generations had reduced the glorious family of warriors to asinine parasites entrenched in backroom politics.

The second-to-last count had been especially egregious; not a trace of his honorable forefather remained. Wasting most of his hours drowning in debauchery and toying with the arts, his involvement in stately matters was only worth mentioning when he was exploiting his indirect link to the Emperor's maternal family to lap up greedy under-the-table deals. But eventually, the fool's avarice produced a plan to become *Emperor*.

His inept plan was discovered on the spot. However, heinous tricks were his sole calling in life: he'd propped up a scapegoat, and combined with the lack of concrete evidence, he managed to avoid total ruin. He marched to the palace, bent both knees, and ground his forehead against the pavement by His Majesty's feet; the performance was enough to escape demotion or change of rank...but not enough to survive.

In exchange for sweeping the incident under the rug, the Emperor handed the knave a means to atone for stirring up trouble in his Empire: a glass of wine enchanted with a hex of instant death. Unable to resist the monarch's will, Count Ubiorum accepted the poisoned cup and met his end. His retreat from the public eye on account of a "stress-induced illness" quelled His Majesty's rage, and his eldest son inherited the title.

Alas, high society was cold to a house stumbling over itself—especially so when whispers of treason could be caught on the winds.

The final Count Ubiorum made every effort to restore his family glory, but chose the worst possible means to do so: instead of waiting for years of honest work to clear his name, he dipped his toes into the realm of shadows in a plot to turn things around at once. Was it his fault, or did the blame lay with his father, who'd taught him nothing of politics but poison, daggers, and blackmail?

Whatever the case, the undeniable reality was that he died under dubious circumstances, his body discovered too late for history to know the truth. Imperial nobles were the cautious sort, and no amount of rummaging through diaries would suffice to uncover what had truly come to pass.

The death of Count Ubiorum sent shock waves through the region. Of course it did: not only did his land contain some of the most important trade routes—both on land and by river—in the whole

nation, but it was home to abundant textile, leatherworking, and metallurgic industries the likes of which were hard to match across the Empire. Tax revenue in the region was one of the highest in the country, clocking well within the top fifty noble estates even in its historically worst years. No bad name was too terrible to bear if it meant laying claim to the fertile bosom of the Maiden Rhine; to call her bounty tremendous was a disservice to the region's gifts.

There was no world in which those affiliated with the county could resist its temptations; a vicious battle for inheritance began, with every legitimate heir quickly being removed from the picture in one way or another.

The lack of direct descendants didn't mean that *all* ties of blood had been severed. Alas, those who survived to throw their hat into the ring were invariably lowly knights unfit to rule a county; high unrelated relatives whose ancestors had left the Ubiorum family gods knew how many generations prior; or clans with questionable accounts of how they may or may not have adopted a child so-and-so years ago.

If that wasn't tumultuous enough, random hopefuls appeared claiming to be the illegitimate child of the late count's grandfather, or the bastard kid of his father. Worst of all, some claimed that their bloodline traced back to the original rightful heir—the second Ubiorum had been the second son, on account of his elder brother's early death—and that their family had been in hiding all this time, waiting for this moment.

In short, a wake of vultures had come flying in with their most far-fetched excuses to try and feed on the land's ample wealth.

The Emperor was, of course, apprehensive. This was a precious region that the Founding Emperor had given to one of his most loyal retainers: it served as both a manufacturing powerhouse and a vital point in the nation's commercial network. Not only could he not allow it to fall into the hands of an idiot, but one false step could empower a true villain to plunge the nation into domestic chaos.

Eventually, the list of potential inheritors swelled past one hundred, forcing His Majesty's hand. Steeling himself for the backlash that would follow, he made his decree: House Ubiorum was tangentially related to the sitting Emperor, and as such, the crown would carefully watch over the estate until a suitable candidate arrived.

"But *I'm* the suitable candidate!" the vultures all cried at once, causing a massive stir. But the Emperor held strong, conspiring with his successor's vassals and even employing less than reputable means to silence the mobs.

And so the Ubiorum county had sat ungoverned for tens of years,

loosely maintained and sparsely scrutinized by the crown that supposedly owned it.

Not even an emperor could watch over all the imperial lands at once, especially with a personal estate to take care of. For generations, the crown had done no more than dispatch national officials to conduct inspections of the local magistrates and maintain law and order—not enough to put an end to wrongdoing by any means.

Even children dared to swipe cookies from the pantry when the watchful eyes of mother and father were away; the thoughts of money-grubbing souls in an unsupervised land were hardly going to be any more mature.

With every passing coronation, each newly appointed Emperor would put in the effort to keep the county from rotting entirely; to an outside observer, the region seemed healthy enough. Alas, a closer look showed that their attempts had still allowed a hotbed of minor spoilage to fester.

The Empire could not afford to claim the heads of every magistrate or government official who broke the rules: eventually, it would run out of people to oversee its territory. Besides, there was no guarantee that a replacement was any better than the criminal they were replacing—or that they weren't a spy sent to tip the balance toward one of the inheritors still biding their time to take the Ubiorum name.

The issue was in much need of solving, but had thus been kicked down the road until now. In the scandal's heyday, claims of legitimacy had popped up like bamboo shoots after a storm; now the majority of them had withered away, their lives and passions fizzling into the sands of time.

Yet there were a stubborn few who refused to quit: immortals mainly, scheming on a scale grander than their short-lived competition. Unlike their mortal peers, they had the option of waiting—and waiting was key. Little by little, after the initial fervor had died off, they picked at the issue, inching the position toward their chosen candidate.

Among them was one Marquis Donnersmarck. Despite leading a marquise, he was technically a branch of an electorate house and lacked the privilege to vote himself, occupying a delicate position crafted by the circumstances of history.

The methuselah marquis had once taken in a beloved mistress from House Ubiorum—this was his pretext for inheritance. At the inception of his scheme, he'd tweaked the written record of his long-deceased mistress to say that she'd been his legal wife, and turned an unrelated child of his into "her" son.

Marquis Gundahar von Donnersmarck was perhaps the closest

among all those vying for the position of count, and he was attending to his daily duties in his personal office when one of his sleuths returned with an unwelcome report.

“Oh? Has the situation changed?”

The marquis was a handsome man by every account. His face was slim and graceful, capped with two glimmering ashen eyes that overflowed with warmhearted goodwill. Long hair of matching color was slicked back with a glossy shine under the mystic lamps. Aptly trained muscles offset his slender build with good balance, and he was tall enough to make most desks look cramped, but his custom furniture allowed him to recross his lithe legs in the other direction.

At his feet was a shadow clad entirely in navy blue. The garb veiled their figure to hide any distinguishing characteristics, and they warbled their own voice to make it impossible to pin down even the most basic identifying traits.

“Yes, sir. The Emperor’s coronation is to be accompanied by a handful of pardons and awards made in the last Emperor’s honor. Promotions and noble conferments will commence at the ceremony, and the Ubiorum county was among the names listed for the occasion.”

The man’s benevolent smile never wavered, but for a brief moment, a precarious gleam flashed in his eyes.

Marquis Donnersmarck was well-known for his love of philanthropy: he maintained an orphanage on his own estate, and donated great sums of money toward charitable pursuits uplifting the poor. Even in the capital, there was an almshouse with his name on it to show his commitment to noble pursuits; his reputation was perfectly in line with his gentle appearance.

Yet in truth, he was the sort to proactively involve himself with countless battles over ownership of land and name—the Ubiorum county was merely another item on the list. He was a viper at heart, collecting vassals who prized their loyalty to him above even their obligations to the Emperor. Perhaps his sway was easiest to demonstrate by mentioning that the feudal lords collared by leashes in his hand numbered in the *dozens*.

The man was a rarity among his kind. Most methuselah were free spirits, content to let their power wane while they wandered off to indulge in their favorite pastimes. But while it was easy to be fooled, he was not driven by some insatiable, irregular lust for power: the art of machination, in and of itself, was his greatest joy.

Accumulating wealth and power was a tedious necessity to most methuselah, but primarily because their imaginations were most often captured by pursuits that could be wholly accomplished in the confines of their own minds. Gifted with the capacity for parallel

thought at unimaginable speeds, the most important quality of any given hobby was its depth—how difficult it was to tire of. Naturally, scholarly pursuits of magecraft, science, mathematics, and astronomy were popular for how much thought they required. Second to them were artistic ventures like painting and music, which challenged the creative senses.

But to Marquis Donnersmarck, no craft could match the kaleidoscopic beauty of conspiracy. When people's darkest ambitions flowed together, corrupting the occasional wellspring of loyalty or peace, they swirled into a senseless evil that threatened to engulf the realm of statecraft whole. Countless episodes ran along these lines, but not once did the core of a struggle repeat itself.

Thus he had found his infinite source of amusement: the dimly lit alleys of political schemes. Burdened with talent as he was, centuries of earnest effort had still not been enough to so much as lay a finger on the prized imperial throne. What other art could offer such unknowable depth?

At times, this dangerous game offered thrilling run-ins with eternal slumber; he nodded at his subordinate's report with intrigue.

"Hm... And not a word to any of those involved."

"I believe the crown's stance is that the matter was settled in the negotiation fifty years ago. Not even the members of the privy council were allowed to object on the matter."

"How forceful. A slight on the Emperor of Creation's words, even: 'Only with the consent of his assembly shall the Emperor's decree know magnificence.'"

The marquis shifted in his chair, reallocating the majority of his processing power from various other plots to this one—but to tell the truth, he was already close to giving up.

To begin with, his claim was based on lies and forgery; his plan had been to pick off his rivals and acquire the county by virtue of being the last notable power remaining. This war of attrition wasn't something he'd been brewing for eons, but rather an idea he'd scratchbuilt following the final Count Ubiorum's death. He'd simply looked at the situation and figured he had a winning shot.

However, he had still put a nonzero amount of effort into securing his spot as the prime candidate. Losing that stung.

Alas, he had to concede that his position wasn't particularly strong either. While still better than the rabble's, his justifications would not be enough to impede the crown's attempt to man a vital station that had gone abandoned for half a century. He'd lined the pockets of many a local knight, magistrate, and noble, helping along their corrupt businesses, but it was unrealistic to expect their support to stand up to the Emperor's will.

Marquis Donnersmarck could have all his agents in the region sign a petition in blood, swearing to end their own lives in protest if some unknown person was to lord over them...but His Majesty would probably reply with an imperial letter telling them to do it. The Emperor wanted nothing more than for the pesky vermin to conveniently vanish, leaving open slots to be filled; in all likelihood, he was ready for just as many heads to fly when his newly chosen count took office anyway. If he wasn't, then he wouldn't have dared to pick away a decades-old scab and reopen this old wound.

"What a blunder. The only path forward is to see how others react, Wit suppose. To think the Empire was ready to employ such drastic measures..."

Even though he'd updated the rest of his vocabulary, the ancient methuselah could never quite let go of the first-person pronoun of his youth, closer to the tongues of old than modern Rhinian. Leaning onto an armrest and propping his chin up, Marquis Donnersmarck let out a disappointed sigh and began to fiddle with a strand of hair that had fallen onto his face. Still, it wasn't anything to fret over. Over the course of his long life, he'd encountered too many miscalculations and aggravating turns of fate to count.

Here was a man who had seen the Empire rise: he could still recall his boyhood spent serving the first three kings Richard had taken in. This was but a trifle, a chipped fragment in the overarching game of strategy. Reaching too far for a fallen scrap would ensure he'd be too late to take his share of the pie on the table.

One day, he cared not when, but *one day* he would make his dream come true. Whatever the era, he would rise to the throne as king or emperor of a nation vital on the world stage—until then, wisdom dictated that he choose his battles.

"Now, what sort of character is this new Count Ubiorum?"

"I have looked into her."

"Oh?"

The marquis glanced over with great interest, and his spy produced a thick packet of papers to hand him. The agent's clan had served this man for generations; they were more than mere messenger pigeons, only serving to report the news. Precise calculation required information, and they were the cream of the crop, bringing him all the intelligence he needed to plot his next step.

"Hm, a foreign lady. A daring move, this is. And she has ties to the College, at that... How very like the new Emperor—or should Wit say, of Martin I? Agrippina du Stahl, was it?"

Thorough to an extreme, the dossier even included a sketch of the woman's face. While the document provoked more questions than it answered, knowing her backstory and appearance was a large first

step. One's nature often came through in looks, and more importantly...

"How beautiful. She's quite my type. Strong of will, sharp of mind, yet not inflated by the head on her shoulders—or so she seems."

Seldom few methuselah ever found meaning in producing children, but Marquis Donnersmarck was one of them. Where others of his kind lacked the interest to employ their lower halves, he was the sire to a copious brood. Not only did he see value in marriage for political means, but he displayed a sensual vigor ordinarily unseen amongst his peers.

Gently setting down the likeness, he muttered, "How...*fascinating*. Continue your investigation."

"Yes, sir."

The shadowy warrior melted into the dark, disappearing at their master's order. Untiring, their sole purpose was as an agent of his ambition. His villainy had come a long way from an Empireless era, and he hid his greed behind a refreshing smile as he outlined the mental image of his new scheme.

[Tips] Having a child or two is more than average among methuselah. In fact, there exist records of a thousand-year-old individual with only three children across an entire millennium. Naturally, the books show that most that have perished were too busy engaging in their hobbies to bear any children at all.

Autumn of the Fourteenth Year

Promotion

At times, the party as a whole may be bestowed official titles as rewards for quests or in exchange for reputation points. However, role-playing is a vital element in TRPGs, and as such, their newfound standing in society may add restrictions on certain actions, causing the players to have to change their approach to playing their characters. The strictest GMs may even demand their players act and speak in accordance with their stature.

Just as intellect is not something that can be fabricated, not even the most earnest attempt will allow the undignified to don the veil of true class.

Delicate fingers lifted the spoon from an orderly row of silverware with confidence and silently submerged the tip in an amber soup. Hardly any ripples wrinkled out as the spoon sank deeper, navigating past an array of stewed ingredients to scoop up a few drops of liquid that were unspeakably flavorful. The little globule was then gracefully carried up, disappearing behind lips without so much as a slurp.

This was the work of a noble, through and through. I would know: I had the great misfortune of attending high-profile social gatherings with not-uncommon frequency—as a servant, of course—and was used to seeing these exact mannerisms.

At least, I would have been, had it not been at the hand of my lovable baby sister.

“Dear Brother? Whatever might be the matter?”

“Oh, nothing. Don’t worry, Elisa.”

Elisa must have noticed me looking as I worked through my daily chores, because she turned around and flashed me an elegant smile. Autumn had begun, and the official imperial succession was close; the season also marked my fourteenth year, and Elisa would follow suit at nine in another few months.

My oh-so-very-adorable sister’s refinement trended ever closer toward the boundary of true class. Not too long ago, she had been hard-pressed to sip her soup, and achieving a willowy stride had been a struggle.

Yet now, the plainclothes—though markedly more eye-catching than the festival threads back home—Lady Leizniz had gifted her felt

perfectly tailored for the young lady she'd become. If I didn't know any better, I would've thought that her first bath had been in scented oils and her baby clothes woven from silk.

Two seasons later, I still wasn't used to the new her. It wasn't as if she'd changed completely: her tastes remained the same, and obviously she retained all her memories.

"Is that so? You're so silly, Dear Brother."

Oh, of course. She'd *grown*.

Until now, Elisa had been a bit underdeveloped for her age. Eight-year-olds were naturally expected to be childlike, but even then, she had been too immature; her years of stunted development meant that, for a while, her accelerated growth had only been catching her back up to where she should have been.

But now look at her: ever since coming to the capital, she'd grown up nearly beyond recognition.

Elisa spoke a refined palatial dialect reserved for the upper crust, her every mannerism betraying an education just as privileged. Maybe I should have expected this: we'd been away from the canton for over a year, and she'd spent every day since learning directly from a noble. Truthfully, the children around her age whom I saw around the College unfailingly displayed class and intellect beyond their years; being official students, they were certainly blue-blooded, and clearly their education had been the key to their dignity, much like my sister's.

Still...it wasn't so long ago that I'd left Konigstuhl behind at the age of twelve—from the time when my baby sister could hardly form sentences and clung to me like a duckling. The rate at which she was leaving those days behind ran too fast for my comfort.

Or was that my ego speaking? Was it my own selfish wish that Elisa would forever remain a cute little baby...who had to rely on me?

No matter how it begins, people are creatures of growth; as her brother, it was my job to accept that. Elisa was Elisa. She was the adorable little girl I'd pampered until now, to be sure, but she was also the grown woman that she *wanted* to become.

It turned out that I was far more self-centered than I'd realized. Looking back, the fear that had enveloped me when Elisa clung to me in tears hadn't been unease at the thought of how *she* would change; it had been the anxious emotions of a man who'd based part of his identity on being the dependable older brother.

Elisa may have been a changeling, but more importantly, she was *her*. My place wasn't to fear her; it was to accept her, growth and all. The dreadful tricks my mind had played on me were mine to sort out.

Besides, there were plenty of things that hadn't changed in the slightest. No matter how refined her movements, her fork always

reached for her favorite dishes first; her knife always cut the things she didn't like into tiny pieces; and her spoon always scooped up too much of her favorite pudding, leaving less dessert to be savored later. Even as she approached mastery in palatial speech, she never referred to me as "Brother Dearest"; hints of "Mr. Brother" lived on in the flipped order.

You know, maybe I was just experiencing the loneliness of a parent whose child was experimenting with independence. As they grew up, children tried their best to make themselves seem tougher: they refused to walk beside their parents, turned down after-school snacks while pretending they didn't like sweets, and quit waiting by the television to watch anime at six o'clock.

In a similar fashion, Elisa must have realized the need to grow up—she must have *wanted* it. With her mind governed by her fey half, my changeling sister was fated to mature in ways alien to mensch. The dramatic changes had frightened me, but only because I was a mere mensch myself.

So it was time: I would accept her and celebrate.

Sure, the clingy baby Elisa stumbling over words was cute, but the adult Elisa would definitely be just as adorable. Knowing her, she would grow up to be a stunning beauty at the center of high society. Taking after our mother, she'd blossom into a pristine lily, gracing the world with willowy elegance...

Wait. A beautiful, successful, *magus*?!

Elisa lacked the catastrophic character flaws of our rotten master and that irredeemable pervert; there was nothing to impede her popularity. At this rate, all sorts of disgusting insects would crawl around to pick at the petals...

"...Dear Brother? Are you certain that everything is all right?"

"Oh, Elisa. Don't worry. I was just trying to recall which glove I'm supposed to throw in someone's face for a duel."

"A duel?! U-Um, if I'm not mistaken, I believe you're meant to throw it at their feet..."

The face of a stupid punk trying to mess with my sister was no better than the floor anyway: both were getting stomped on sooner or later. Elisa still seemed concerned, though, so I told her that she didn't have to worry about a thing and went back to my chores.

Eventually, Elisa finished up her meal—which doubled as etiquette training—and I figured it was time for us to clean up and head back to the low quarter.

But in that same instant, the long-sealed crypt that was the madam's laboratory opened. I heard the cataclysmic creak of a gate bolted several times over and rusted shut by centuries of neglect as it swung. Obviously, the well-oiled hinges of a door unopened for a

mere few months—I would have waited on Lady Agrippina if she'd called, but terrifyingly enough, she never had—did not actually make any sound.

Yet when the door silently fulfilled its purpose, it unveiled a terrible demon hidden within.

The fiend was beautiful. Her dark-blue and light-jade eyes drooped cordially into an elegant smile, and she wore lavish clothes that I hadn't so much as seen before. Woven from material impossible to come by in the Empire, the satin's wet gloss was unlike anything she generally preferred to wear; furthermore, the jet-black robe was a great departure from her usual partiality for subdued primaries.

This was no ordinary robe. Mystic formulae were woven in at every angle to protect and support the wearer while threatening terrible harm to any attacker—it could only be described as enchanted armor. She could choose to stand absolutely still and it would *still* be dubious whether I could kill her with a blade in hand.

As an extra surprise, she was holding a staff. While I'd seen her pull one out a few months ago when she visited Lady Leizniz, that had been a fashion item that prioritized its lavish form over its middling function.

Methuselah almost never needed staves. Their organic capacity to turn mana into physical phenomena was outstanding enough to outstrip most catalysts entirely. Someone as rational as Lady Agrippina would never go out of her way to employ a tool in service of making herself *weaker*, so the fact that she was wielding this one proved it was worthy of her power.

Frankly, I could tell as much by the ominous glow of the gem that crowned it. As much as I wished I could wipe the memory away, I'd seen this hue of jade before: it was the same disconcerting green that had overflowed from the madam's eye upon removing her monocle to read the *Compendium of Forgotten Divine Rites*... That thing was *definitely* bad news.

Wait, hold on. Let me get this straight. Are you telling me this monster of a magus is in a position where she needs help forming one of her spells?!

A dangerous person had appeared looking dangerously motivated, equipped with dangerous gear, capped off with a blatantly dangerous grin. I unconsciously groped for a sword in panic. For all her training, the sheer surprise had thrown Elisa's manners out the window, causing her to drop the napkin she'd been wiping her mouth with and stare at our master in blank amazement.

"My, my. It's been so long. I'm glad to see you two in good health."

Who the hell are you?! I only just managed to stop myself from shouting and leveling the Craving Blade—which I had not called for

but appeared in my hand anyway—at her.

No, really. What in the world happened? As far as I remembered, Lady Agrippina was verifiably not the type to smile with genteel grace, and this noble aura around her was utterly foreign to me. If *this* was the madam ready for battle, then nothing could possibly scare me more.

She stepped forward, ignoring our befuddlement with such grace that it was as if she hadn't registered us at all. Then, out of nowhere, she said, "Prepare to depart. And you'll be coming along too this time, Elisa."

After months of silence, the madam immediately wanted to go *outside*? Not only that, but this was a woman who could teleport this way and that whenever she pleased, and she was ready to walk on her own two legs; if our presence as her retainer and disciple was *needed* to save face, then we were headed somewhere gravely serious.

"R-Right now?" I asked.

"Of course. Dress yourselves in your finest threads, because we will be going to the imperial palace. Lady Leizniz has gifted you something suitable, I'm sure. Ah, and bring the carriage out as well."

The need to dress up to visit the palace was beyond obvious. However, the fact that she demanded the carriage be prepared for such a short distance meant this was no business trip: she was to participate in some kind of solemn ceremony.

Imperial style prized efficiency, but it considered ritual to have its own utilitarian value. At times, carriage rides covered comically short distances in order to keep up airs. If we were about to ride in through the front gate... My trembling was cut short by the sudden ejection of a wooden box from a tear in empty space.

"What the?!"

I took a step back—a *ten-meter* step back—and slid to catch myself. Lady Agrippina smiled and told me it was a gift to celebrate my fourteenth birthday.

Huh? Why? Now? But you didn't give me anything when I turned thirteen...

Still smiling, she wordlessly pressured me to open it. I reached out as gingerly as I could, taking the box in hand as though it were a nuclear land mine needing to be defused. Cracking it open, I was surprised to find it filled with nothing but books and leaflets of paper.

"*Huh?!?*"

But upon closer inspection, it really *was* a nuclear bomb.

The tome I'd picked up was titled *Intersections of the Prosaic World and Forms Corporeal and Thaumaturgical*. The edges were singed, hinting at a failed attempt at censoring the text. If nothing else, I was sure the central topic delved into themes Rhinians forbade. The more I

du, the more chilling material I found: some touched on unblockable magicks, others focused on strengthening barriers and attacks, and the box even contained essays stamped with the words “SALE PROHIBITED.”

This was the mystic equivalent of a vat of poison. Possession alone would see me cuffed, but after forcing it into my hands, my villainous master gave a simple thumbs-up without letting her ladylike facade crumble for a second.

“By my estimate, you’ll be needing those in the near future. Make sure you look through them when we return.”

“What?!”

“On top of your duties as a servant, you’ll likely find yourself occupying the seat of my personal retainer, so do try your best.”

“Hold on!”

“Anyhow, I shall leave the preparations to you. Be ready to leave in two hours at the latest.”

I couldn’t do anything as the madam lazily waved her hand and returned to her room. I would have at least liked to flip her the bird, but Lady Agrippina hadn’t changed since we’d first met her in Konigstuhl: appearing like an unforeseen cyclone, she vanished just as quickly, whisking us siblings away into her trouble.

No, seriously. What the hell happened?

[Tips] Personal spats are criminal in the Empire, but official duels registered in the books are perfectly legal. Sometimes, shame can only be dispelled at the edge of a sharpened blade—a belief well understood by the monarchical system.

The white imperial palace in the heart of the capital was home to twenty-five meeting halls, each named after a flower. Of them, the Rose Rot was the most splendiferous, famous even abroad for its resplendence; the austere Lily Weiss was well-known as the most dignified location in the palace.

But one room was spoken of only in hushed whispers tinged with dread. Opened only when the College professoriat convened with His Majesty, here stood the Water Lily Schwarz. Rows and rows of seats rippled out from the podium at the center of the room, colloquially referred to by those less carefully spoken as the executioner’s platform.

Who could blame them? It was no exaggeration to call this the home turf to the most brilliant minds in the whole nation. Even the most influential figures found themselves mercilessly berated by the magia here if they dared misspeak: the annals of history recorded occasions in which prestigious bureaucrats had come here to plead for

the magia's help, only to literally die of indignation when the crowd ruthlessly poked at every hole. It was, in many ways, hell.

The harvest period was a delicate time, as most of the nobility were home to collect their taxes, and those gathered for the professorship examinations were bracing for pandemonium. Of course, this event preceded the winter social season every year, but this time, the occasion had been accompanied by a notice from the Emperor...and one who was to take the throne as autumn came to a close. Whatever he had to say, it was certainly no frivolity.

While the pedagogical class of the College had its fair share of diehard academics who cared little for politics, it had just as many who waded deep into the system to procure the funds needed for the never-ending hole of expenses that was research. Yet whether an honorary noble or one with the rights to an estate, they were all sensitive to the goings-on of high society.

The hearts of the most notable minds in magecraft pounded at the trouble brewing in the air, ready to evaluate the presentations of those who wished to join their ranks.

That said, this performance was in truth no more than a final confirmation. All the professors in attendance had already been given copies of the applicants' dissertations and thus knew what was going to be said.

This was but a matter of course. Unlike a musical recital, the results of thaumaturgical trials were difficult to convey to others. They required careful scrutiny to validate, as even experiments accompanied by a practical illustration could be dubious: was it sheer coincidence that the caster managed to do what they claimed, or was it true magic, based in unshakable theory? One look was never enough to tell.

The professors had already completed their analyses, waiting with bated breath to utter their thinly veiled mockery: "I'm not precisely an expert in this field, but..." and, "I apologize if I missed this in your earlier explanation..." were the fluff to conceal their critical sneak attacks.

So, as ever, they snapped the souls of a handful of bright hopefuls...when a methuselah took the stage. Her dazzling silver hair was bound in a chignon, and her heterochromic eyes gleamed with provocation. The professoriat welcomed Researcher Agrippina du Stahl to take the podium.

Her preference for reds and blues was nowhere to be seen in her black satin robe lined with intricate geometric patterns. More unusual still, she had appeared holding a staff meant to bolster her casting power. Few were the times a methuselah felt the need to reinforce their natural arcane capacity: only when they delved into spells too

grand or when the social situation called for it.

However, the sickening and sinister green of that which she'd chosen was proof enough that it was unfit to be ferried about in public. She wasn't scheduled for a practical illustration, but perhaps preparing her full combat dress was her own way of displaying the intensity of her will.

"If I may be excused, I should like to begin my presentation."

Clear and crisp, the methuselah's voice was devoid of hesitation. Yet the members of the audience oozed with anticipation nonetheless, wondering which inaccuracy they ought to pick at first. Unintelligent work could simply be struck down, but inventive ideas presented with wording that was just a *touch* shy of perfection tickled the sadistic hearts that made up the crowd; they, too, had risen to their post enduring a barrage of insults from those who had come before.

But of all the professors, one found herself quivering in anxiety as opposed to excitement. She was the girl's master: Lady Magdalena von Leizniz.

When she had first read her pupil's dissertation for peer review, she'd spat out her tea and wondered if her student had somehow ruined her health. The essay was simply too full of holes for a girl verifiably capable of passing this examination. How could the dean relax when she'd explicitly told her that she must not fail?

Naturally, Lady Leizniz had attempted time and time again to contact her apprentice before today, asking if the girl truly believed this would be enough. Yet every letter had come back with a reply not to worry, and even when she'd employed a second official summons, she'd been declined with the perfectly reasonable excuse of needing time to complete the essay she'd assigned.

Tormented to her core, the wraith could feel the stomach she'd long since lost churn. At this rate, everything would come crashing down.

After all, *she* would never approve of an essay like this.

Alas, it was too late. Once started, the presentation could not be stopped. The wraith clutched at her heart and gut as the methuselah's resonant voice began to fill the hall.

Speaking with the smart clarity of an actor onstage, she went through her thesis...and someone in the audience cocked their head. Another person flipped through their copy of the work with a curious "Oh?" and another still rifled through their notes with a puzzled "Hm?"

The speech was straying from the written material.

But make no mistake: this was not the trite, unplanned tangent of a woman who'd forgotten her script from a lack of preparation. She was stitching up the holes in her argument in real time, filling each

with elaborate explanations of magical theory. Furthermore, she was injecting new material—no, she was embroidering the patches in such a way that recontextualized the whole of what she'd written. Though she stuck close to the words on the page, her speech was implying a completely different conclusion, causing the hall to stir.

No normal person could have understood. Even if one could decipher the processes outlined in a magus's writing, true comprehension in the art of magecraft was prerequisite to seeing the crux of any sufficiently deep essay.

Yet the audience was made up of the scholastic monsters that ran the College. They had not fluked their way into a position where they could teach others...but unbelievably, the woman before them spoke as if she were honoring them with *her* instruction. Without her elucidations, with only the text, the reader could only draw so many conclusions; its meaning changed with every word.

They knew—they were *made* to know—that this was not *A Treatise on Efficient Mana Transmissions Through Non-Euclidean Planes*. This was a work that borrowed that title...to delve into an art forbidden by the Trialist Empire; one that had been abandoned as an unattainable impossibility; a peak of mystic pursuits that could put magecraft on negative timescales.

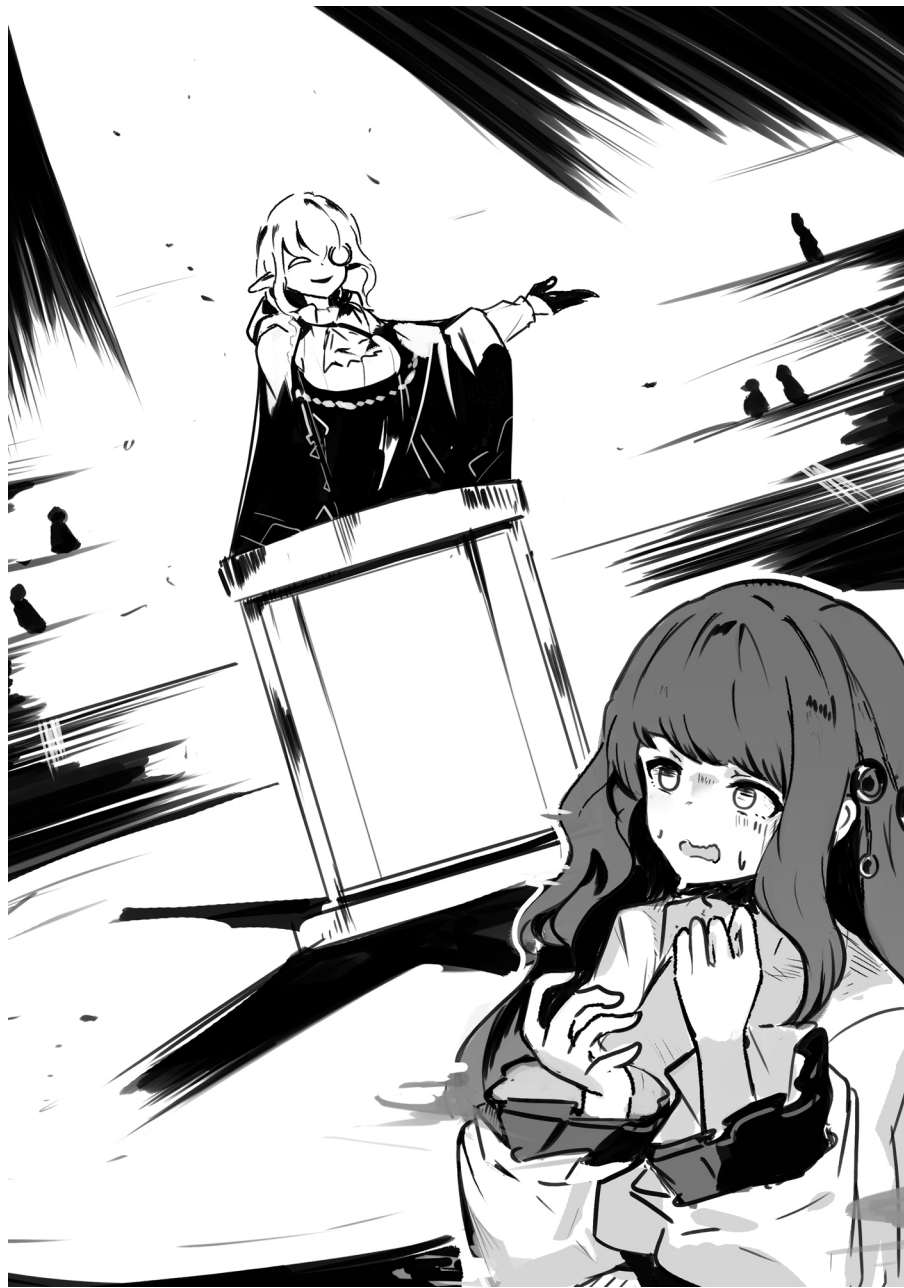
This was an essay about the fundamental principles of *time reversal magic*.

The methuselah ignored the unbridled murmurs of the crowd, concluding her presentation completely unharmed. In the end, she had perfectly tailored her speech and essay to balance on a knife's edge, giving the impression that the technology was feasible, but that its implementation remained precarious to navigate. Not bothering to offer the floor to those with questions, she moved on to close out.

Her every word was venom.

"I humbly thank you all for spending your precious time considering these lowly ideas of mine. While I am most aware that the thesis of an inexperienced soul must ring presumptuous in your learned minds, I shall endeavor to not let the finer secrets of this craft that I have just so begun to grasp escape me in my continued research."

Devoid of intent, her smile would have rivaled those of the most beautiful marble statues; with context, it was the sneer of an irredeemable fiend. Death had failed to stop Lady Leizniz's complexion from worsening, and the color of her face had grown paler and paler at exponential rates since the presentation had begun—she most certainly understood the true message of that grin.



“Allow me to offer thanks to my master, Professor Magdalena von Leizniz, for her *full* cooperation and support. And to Professor Martin Werner von Erstreich, for his *powerful* backing over the course of this project.”

I’ve been had! The talented wraith was on the verge of forgetting the public eye and throwing her head down.

The College’s stance on forbidden arts was that they could be unearthed in times of need and wielded by those fit to use them. Considering how the professoriat was a collection of inhuman beings deeply entrenched in such pursuits, the taboo nature of Agrippina’s discovery was not an issue.

No, the problem lay with how she’d devised a means to accomplish something heretofore written off as *impossible*. This one breakthrough was a singularity—a basis upon which countless long-abandoned dreams of sorcery could be explored. This was an irreversible paradigm shift, sure to change the world’s understanding of spells and cantrips forever.

It was a finding that all the schools of thought, and all the scholars in them, coveted deeply. Now one cadre had begun to uncover its secrets—or perhaps this was an insinuation that they knew even more than they let on—and had gotten an imperial grand duke involved. Not only that, but it was the grand duke who was slated to become *Emperor*; the methuselah had hinted at the idea that His Majesty knew this breakthrough was coming.

Who was to say what kind of anarchy would result from a single faction laying claim to one of the highest heights of magecraft? Terrible omens of the cooled cadre wars reigniting flashed through Lady Leizniz’s mind.

Of course, this wasn’t a predestined future. If she and the other deans of the College navigated the tumultuous political climate with great attention, it was possible that the whole affair could be settled peacefully behind closed doors; in fact, the discovery might even become fuel to propel her flock further ahead of those around them.

However, if she made the slightest error in judgment, that fuel would turn into an explosive ready to massacre everyone in range.

Unfortunately, the systematic regime of Rhine meant undoing the process of ennoblement this late was infeasible. They were locked into their planned arrangement, where a supermassive bomb could use the Emperor and her professorship to do as she pleased in the name of count palatine. Too late to reverse, the Empire would be forced to push forward on its current course. The papers granting House Ubiorum and the position of count thaumapalatine upon successful ascension to professorship had already been signed.

Had the monarchy been absolute, perhaps the tale would be different. Alas, imperial citizens prized their national assembly and would not forgive wanton vetoes. Otherwise, the Trialist Empire of Rhine would cease to be itself; the cogs in the machine continued to turn, upholding the righteousness of the imperial regime. Despite its cataclysmic creaking, the system moved along, ferrying the Emperor and dean both toward equal parts ruin and distinction.

“Well, ahem. I hereby commence the vote of approval on the ascension of Agrippina du Stahl. Will those in agreement please rise.”

The professor serving as this year’s master of ceremonies managed to keep a steady voice as he pushed the show forward. As with all his peers, he was beside himself with intrigue and the frustration that he hadn’t come up with the idea himself, but his self-worth as a noble managed to keep him from breaking conduct by shouting.

Slowly but surely, the audience crawled back to reality...and stood up.

They all knew that this was a catastrophe. They knew that mismanaging this affair could end the Empire as they knew it. Yet to fail to acknowledge this discovery left them no ground to stand on as magia who had won their positions with genius. Deny her, and the pride that anchored them at the top of the social ladder would crumble.

And so, Professor Agrippina du Stahl was sworn in with the first unanimous vote in many years.

Envisioning the torrent of hardship that would follow, her master and the Emperor were paler in undeath than any corpse. Ready to claim her position as count thaumapalatine, the newly christened Agrippina von Ubiorum turned to them with the sweetest of smiles.

I shan’t go down alone.

[Tips] Though the crown holds immense power in the Trialist Empire, the Emperor cannot confer, remove, or revoke a noble title on his own—a trivial, obvious check to prevent corruption at the hands of a single bad monarch. Simply put, His Majesty is not to go back on his word.

While those in attendance could listen to the end if they so chose, they were also permitted to leave early if they were no longer needed. The official announcement of Agrippina’s new title and deed was His Majesty’s to make, and the actual person in question did not have to stay.

Today was not the day she would kneel at the Emperor’s feet and endure pompous rites of pens and swords. Ceremony was best partaken of in befitting settings—that is to say, there was a process to

vanity. Water Lily Schwarz was home only to the trial of academia, and the relevant facts alone were fit for the hall.

As such, Agrippina took her leave, neither staying with her fellow professors nor returning to the drawing room for those who'd presented. She was free to go.

"...My sincerest congratulations on your rise to professorship."

"Um... Congratulations?"

Hurrying home, the master was trailed by her servant and apprentice, who followed to offer their well-wishes—though with markedly unenthusiastic tones of voice. The boy had pieced together the meaning behind his birthday present and why he'd be promoted to being a noble retainer; his words oozed bloodlust. On the other hand, the girl had followed her into the presentation hall and seen her moment of glory with her own two eyes; she wasn't quite sure what had happened, and her celebration was tinged with befuddlement.

"Mm. As much as I loathe the thought of promotion, thank you both."

However, the master remained nonchalant, and her sour mood was plainly visible on her face. This had been a terrible fate that only barely edged out the alternative of killing her own master and fleeing the country; being jealously "applauded" by the walking corpses that lined the waiting room had done nothing to uplift her mood either.

Frankly, Agrippina was at her wit's end. She was going to go home, artificially weaken her resistance to alcohol, and get absolutely soused—any less, and she couldn't go on.

"I take it this is why you warned we might be getting busier?"

"Quite. Today's announcements are all but unofficial, but in due time I will be summoned for my induction of professorship and a formal ennoblement. Following the Emperor's inauguration, I suspect I shall be pulled around to various swearing-in ceremonies and the like. You shall be in charge of preparing and managing my assets; I'll be a count or so by my estimate, so have that in mind."

I'm just a servant! I'm not even a damn noble! The blond runt would have actually shouted had they not been in the imperial palace; in fact, he would have gone so far as to grab his master by the collar.

Of course, most of the heavy lifting would be completed by state bureaucrats. This process was one that would tolerate exactly zero failure; the brightest minds in the imperial cabinet would be put in charge, and would provide detailed instructions that would make sure everything would work out. Still, this was *not* the sort of thing one would ordinarily leave to their servant—it wasn't something that *ought* to be left to a servant either.

Alas, pity the boy: Erich could get it done. He had enough skill to see the task through if he set his mind to it. His servile palatial speech

was serviceable enough to accompany Agrippina even in front of the Emperor, and his divine levels of dexterity afforded him the ability to pen calligraphy beautiful enough to act as his master's proxy. The accounting for a noble estate was a quick matter with parallel calculations, and a smattering of Unseen Hands and Farsight spells would swiftly take care of any investigative work.

Best of all, he could be entrusted with vital documents without the risk of dying along the way, *and* Agrippina had a tight grip on the root of his loyalty. Counterintuitively enough, finding someone more fit for the task would be much harder.

"Fret not, I shan't throw *all* of my responsibilities to you. In any case where personal action is required or where your abilities would fall short, I shall take matters into my own hands. And as bothersome as it is, I'll hire help—overseen by you, of course. Your title will be that of my seniormost retainer, and your salary will be updated to match."

"...Very well, Madam Count."

The boy replied in picture-perfect palatial speech. Pleased by her vassal's ideal response—his spite was hardly enough to bother her—the baron heiress turned imperial count decided to put the unwelcome business of career advancement behind her and triumphantly returned to her atelier.

[Tips] For those who join the ranks of the aristocracy without notable preexisting fortune, the crown supplies a stipend to help them prepare to take their position.

Even unigenerational nobles require mansions, formalwear, and hired help to fit in with their peers in the upper crust. As such, the government awards a celebratory gift upon assumption of the title. The tradition was founded to honor those who win distinction in the face of poverty and hardship, and as such, the funds come directly from the imperial treasury.

Late Autumn of the Fourteenth Year

Nobility

A staple of medieval fantasy settings, noble titles are powerful tools that can sometimes bypass the need for speech checks, but are also prone to coming with strings attached befitting such stature. As such, peerage can often be a useful tool in the setting to teach beginners how to navigate a campaign without an overwhelming degree of choice.

Fall was a hectic season for everyone, but I was sure none would complain if I claimed to be among the busiest in the whole Empire.

The past few months had been *grueling*.

I will be the first to admit that the bureaucrats of the Trialist Empire had done a wonderful job. Professors were sworn in once every few years, and they were well versed in the process of propping up accomplished persons in patrician style whether they had a noble leg to stand on or not.

Yes, indeed, their preparations had been made clear without delay. My employer must have been on the professorship fast track, because the *day after* presenting her dissertation, a bevy of forms and documents arrived at our doorstep. It was then that I'd realized just how exhaustive their preparations were: they'd handpicked a handful of manors in the capital that she was to choose from; she was offered several selections of luxurious textiles, and they'd assemble a fashionable new dress from her favorite; modern style was for women to wear tiaras, so they'd referred her to an artisan who accepted last-minute orders... The list went on, but the point was that the bureaucrats involved had spared no detail in their goal of ennobling the madam.

Now, what do you think Lady Agrippina had to say when I brought all these matters to her?

Why, of course: she'd passed it straight back to me with a punchable smile and an order to "do as you see fit."

Bluntly put, I think a normal person would have died. Rather, I was convinced that scum of the earth had only put me in this position because she knew I *wouldn't*, and that I could actually manage the work. She may have been rotten to her core, popping open bottles of wine while her whipping boy ran around working himself to death,

but she wasn't stupid enough to indulge in idiocy if it would come back to bite her. Had I been a typical servant my age, unfit for tasks beyond menial labor, she would have taken on the work herself, leaking complaints like a broken faucet the whole while.

Though it was too late now, I regretted getting absorbed enough in my own progress to forget to conceal my actual prowess. I may have been nearing fifty years of total experience, but I was a fragile little mensch on the outside. I'd been forced to take traits like Short Sleeper and Efficient Rest just to keep up—this was *not* the kind of job to force on a kid!

Although the arrangements marched along at the expense of my time, sanity, and future health, they were proceeding without any issue on the surface. Count Agrippina von Ubiorum, count thaumapalatine, was now ready to be born anew.

My unembellished thoughts on the matter were that I never wanted to do this again. Unfortunately, I doubted this would be the end.

“Come forth, Agrippina du Stahl.”

No, this was merely the beginning.

Despite my sincere desire to collapse into bed, I found myself standing in the most hallowed space of all the imperial palace: the throne room. I would have expected nothing less from the pinnacle of imperial architecture. The snow-white marble floors; stone walls of unlike color, supported by majestic pillars; and the stained-glass depiction of the Emperor of Creation's coronation on the ceiling came together to produce an atmosphere that weighed on all who entered its presence.

I'd visited the throne room displayed at the Hermitage on a vacation a lifetime ago, but not even that could hold a candle to what I was seeing now. The skylight had been carefully placed to bathe the throne in an enchanting glow that heightened the Emperor's divinity. From there, the ceiling slanted down, the glow of arcane lamps growing dimmer at the flanks where His Majesty's bulwark dutifully lined up. Power pervaded the room's very construction.

Of course, a hall so impressive could only be decorated with artifacts of matching quality. Spoils of war meant to showcase the Emperor's might were placed on display next to the walls. Crowns and scepters of fallen kingdoms shared space with famous swords and personal accessories no doubt representing historical tales of great import. For those countries which still stood today, the Empire displayed countless banners and helmets taken in battle from infamous generals.

The throne, meanwhile, spoke for itself. With its back prodding at the heavens, the seat was far too large for any normal person; yet its

exaggerated features fused to magnify the greatness of he who sat atop it.

Perhaps the most emblematic flourish was the portrait hanging just behind, massive to the point where I couldn't fathom how it had been painted at all. The semicircle of stone that housed the throne was a few steps higher than the floor, and from it rose a wall housing a heavily glorified depiction of Richard the Creator—the first emperor had despised posing for paintings and sculptures, so most of his likenesses had been made well after his death—flanked on each side by portraits of his immediate successors, the Cornerstone and Marshal Emperors.

While we didn't quite match the zeal of the Tokugawa shogunate, the mythos of Rhine had cemented Richard's position in a loose divine canon. Apocryphal accounts claimed he had ended his life with the words, "I have lived as mere man and shall die as him; any more and Eden forged by mortal hands will forever be out of reach," but in reality, imperial citizens venerated him more fervently than many of the gods.

Interestingly, the gods Themselves seemed to take kindly to the man who had honored Their name. The insolence of worshiping a mortal on Their level was cause enough for divine retribution; the evident lack of heavenly punishment was an implicit acceptance. Nowadays, the first three emperors were openly hailed as heroes of a higher class.

Portraits of the six most recent monarchs filled what space remained. The message, as far as I could tell, was that even those who had given up the throne remained ever entwined in the Empire's fate, guiding and scrutinizing their successor through their presences.

Having been called, Lady Agrippina marched forth down a carpet too wide and too long to imagine its construction; the brilliant crimson hadn't faded in the slightest from the time of Richard to now, as the madam strode across it. She had taken the imperial bequeathal of silk magus robes and added her own mystic embroidery, using a splendiferous scarlet dye to tweak it to her liking. Dauntless in her every movement, she made the noble onlookers on the sidelines swallow their breaths with each step.

I'd been careful to touch up her hair down to the roots, and the angelic shimmer of her silver locks outstripped even her mystarille tiara and the large diamond it housed. Enhanced further with makeup, her beauty would have caused the loveliest of songstresses to bury their faces in shame.

Enduring this many gazes while being spoken to by His Imperial Majesty would cause most to shrink and falter; even those who were raised with strict aristocratic educations in courtly conduct would

freely admit some level of anxiety during their official ennoblement—this could very well be the most important moment of their entire lives. Yet Lady Agrippina knew no nervousness. Neither the gazes nor the opinions they conveyed proved any more hurdle than a roadside pebble, all too easily kicked aside.

At long last, she completed her journey, kneeling reverently in the Emperor's presence. But no longer was the Dragon Rider the one summoning her: His Majesty Martin I had partaken in his own ceremony to officially inherit this very throne mere hours prior.

"I ask in the name of the Emperor of this Trialist Empire of Rhine: Who are you?"

"The product of blood flowing in lands to the west, daughter to the Forets name, nobly led by House Stahl—I answer, I am Agrippina."

The madam's answer came clearly and without hesitation. Even accounting for the acoustic engineering and voice-boosting spells set up in the chamber, her tone was remarkably full; no one here would believe they were dealing with a pessimistic misanthrope.

"I ask, not to your heritage nor to your history, but only to the personage of Agrippina who stands before me: Will you give yourself to the imperial bulwark? Will you protect the Empire, defend her peoples, and combat any and every injustice that may arise?"

"I answer, not on my heritage nor my history, but only as the self I am: I swear to fix an adamant loyalty upon my soul, and shall offer the whole of my being to Your Majesty, your Empire, and your subjects. Your reign, in harmony with the gods who witness us, shall be built upon the foundation in which I know myself to be but a brick."

As ritualistic as this back-and-forth seemed, the terrifying thing was that it wasn't scripted. Each exchange was meant to be personal, meaning the oaths themselves had to be thought up by the speaker. I'd known that literary talent was a prerequisite for entering high society, but seeing the poetic song and dance improvised before my eyes gave me a lot to chew on.

Most notably, the words Lady Agrippina had chosen certainly didn't suit her, but they *did* suit the scene. It was impossible to believe she'd thrown this together herself in the past few days, particularly with how much work she had on her own plate.

"My life, my fealty, my blood," she spoke. "I shall give it all for the Empire cradled by the Maiden Rhine. I shall give it all to support your every step, to be the cobbled stone with which you pave your path. Will you take me as a brick in your Empire?"

"On my name as Emperor of the Trialist Empire of Rhine, as Martin Werner von Erstreich, I welcome you, Agrippina du Stahl, as

one of my own. And as my first decree to you, I hereby imbue you with the deed to the Ubiorum county and the rights therein, and appoint you as count thaumapalatine.”

Martin I took a moment to survey the crowd, and— Wait a second. *Have I seen this guy before? Where was it?*

“If there are any who deem my judgment lacking, who believe this not to be in the Empire’s greatest interests, speak now.”

I cocked my head and tried to remember, but nothing came up; I’d probably just caught a passing glance of him somewhere before. Maybe I could’ve recalled exactly when if I’d invested a bit more into Memory and picked up a trait or skill that had to do with recognizing faces.

Just to note, the Emperor’s invitation for objections here was a formality, and anyone that took him up on his offer would be in for a lot of trouble. This wasn’t some romcom where the guy busts in on the wedding in the third act and makes off with the bride, so spoiling the carefully constructed mood was not going to be taken lightly. It was simply a matter of necessary protocol: His Majesty asked, and his subjects stayed quiet with deferential expressions.

That said, even from my place in the servants’ section by the wall, I could make out a handful of people who made no effort to conceal their frustrations.

Lady Agrippina had told me that she was sure to be given an estate embroiled in trouble, filled to the brim with power-hungry cretins that it would be her job to trample. I suspected those who’d been scheming to win the Ubiorum name would start moving to reclaim their mark by any means possible.

What a pain. I’d *already* come across a handful of dubious characters among the recommendations the Emperor’s cabinet had given us for keepers of the madam’s new mansion. While I’d already reported anyone suspicious to Lady Agrippina so she could keep tabs on them, it looked like a peaceful start was more than I could ask for.

“The ceremony is complete. With this, I welcome Count Agrippina von Ubiorum to our ranks. Eternal glory to the Empire.”

“Glory to the Empire! Glory to the Emperor! Glory to Rhine!”

The crowd joined Lady Agrippina in chorus—this was the only part of the ritual that was set in stone. Unfortunately, I’d already seen several others go up before my master; the coordinated chant grew less impressive with every iteration.

All that remained was for the Emperor to hand Lady Agrippina the necessary regalia to rule—the Ubiorum seal and ring and the like—and her turn would be over. The next person to be ennobled would go up and repeat the process, until eventually the pool would be exhausted and the ceremony would move on to conferring

knighthoods. Considering how the coronation had begun at sunrise and taken half the day, I supposed this was a relatively painless process. I'd heard that the knights were to be honored in batches, so we would probably be done by the time the sun set.

Once Lady Agrippina left the stage, I would need to make my own exit to help her change attire. That meant we'd be waltzing into what was effectively enemy territory: her own Berylinian manor. After preparing a new set of clothes, I'd have to get the carriage ready to go *back* to the palace and accompany her to the celebratory banquet being held tonight.

This was rough. I was already running on less than two hours of sleep because I'd stayed up to make sure everything was in order for today. From what I could tell, the inauguration feast would run into the dead of night; I was almost certainly not going to get a chance to catch up on my sleep.

Two all-nighters in a row... The pay raise could screw itself; what I wanted most of all was a twelve-hour break to hit the sack. On Earth, I'd laughed off crunch time as a managerial mistake, but I couldn't do anything about *this*.

To tell the truth, I wished the madam would hire some help. I wanted a proper noble retainer who had the authority not to be made light of in noble dealings—preferably on account of their own blue blood—and five or six attendants with thorough educations. Add another twenty servants to take care of miscellaneous chores, and I could get by working a cool three hours a day.

Alas, that was too much to hope for. Foes outnumbered friends by an obvious margin, and blindly taking on new hires would more likely than not cause more trouble down the line. For now, pushing ourselves to handle everything was the only choice available.

Soon—and by soon, I suspect she meant in half a year or so—Lady Agrippina would be able to recall a handful of trusted assistants from her home abroad, and she'd pull some strings with her few contacts here to muster up a dependable workforce. However, we were still far from ready to claim we had an actual supply of labor, especially factoring in the need to vet those we welcomed.

But you know, that *did* raise some questions.

The odds were good that this villainous master of mine had known things would shape out this way by the time she'd begun writing her essay. I could think of no other explanation for how bold and well rehearsed her preparations seemed.

In which case, she should have been perfectly capable of assembling a team of helpers in advance. She had *space-bending* magic: she could've teleported back home to pick up help if she so chose. Besides, she was perennially one favor to Lady Leizniz away from

having a whole army of trustworthy workers. The irredeemable wraith was a career politician who'd trained countless apprentices from childhood, meaning any graduate loyal to her would be perfect for our cause.

The only explanation I could think of was that this was still within Lady Agrippina's calculations. Was she trying to invite her enemies to send in spies by looking as defenseless as possible?

This theory seemed to put everything into place. She was selling the story of a brilliant researcher thrust into a post beyond her depth, wide open on all fronts as she frantically combatted the hustle and bustle of politics. The false sense of security her "incompetence" produced would be the perfect bait to lure in those who would oppose her. Nothing was easier to parry than a telegraphed attack: she wished to sidestep the first blow and plant a perfect uppercut right in her rivals' jaws. An unexpected counterattack was sure to confuse and disorient; from there, it would be our turn to pick them apart as we pleased.

For those who'd already been ensnared in the trap, Lady Agrippina's confidence today must have seemed like nothing more than a brave front. Gods, was she crafty. Actively painting herself as vulnerable in order to empower her schemes was something else.

But the real issue here wasn't about her. Sure, *she* got to get away with pretending, but *I* was the poor pawn she got to freely use in her machinations on account of my inability to betray her; my destitution was anything but an act.

I was a normal person, for crying out loud, and a mortal at that. Not only did I have to give up chunks of my day eating, sleeping, and shitting if I wanted to stay alive, but I was a delicate *mensch*. Couldn't she cut me some slack?

Unfortunately, the Sleepless and Unhungering traits were locked off no matter how many experience points I earned. I could push my boundaries by picking up things that offered extra hardiness, but there were walls that were insurmountable in my mensch frame.

I'd need to dip my toes into body modification magic and restructure my organs if I wanted features like those. Okay, maybe there were a few supernatural abilities that I simply had yet to find, but their undiscovered nature pointed to my not having the requisite experience to unlock them anyway.

Who would've thought I'd be craving an immortal physique because of *overwork*? What kind of dystopia was I living in? My mind drifted to a futuristic Tokyo where money was the only barrier to the mechanical equivalent to a methuselah's body as I faded from the crowd and followed my master out of the hall.

[Tips] Most events held in the imperial palace are short and simple in respect of the participants' time, but limiting the splendor of coronation in the name of modesty is considered a bridge too far. As such, great stocks of food and wine are circulated throughout the capital, celebrations are held in nearby cantons, and writs of tax exemption are carried off to regions farther from Berylin. The Emperor may bear the brunt of the cost, but his inauguration is expensive for all those in his bulwark.

Agrippina was used to wearing masks, and it took her little time to slip out of du Stahl and into von Ubiorum.

"A pleasure to meet you, von Ubiorum. My name is Lovro Hermer Theodore von Janka. Though my estate is far removed from your own, I am a strong supporter of the School of Daybreak."

"My, Count Janka? The famed herbalist? I happened to read your treatises during my days as a researcher, and had thought then that it was such a shame that you had retired from academic pursuits. But to think that fortune would afford me the honor of speaking to you in person!"

Count Agrippina von Ubiorum was an accomplished scholar, a fervent advocate of the new Emperor, and an innocent lady who prioritized academia over politics. That was the image Agrippina found most convenient, so that was the image she projected onto a social circle where nobody knew her true nature. She wore her mask without shame, and she wore it well.

"Oh, I didn't realize you were aware of my work. How embarrassing—I penned those papers when I was but an unlearned sapling. Looking back now, those were hardly worthy of publication."

"Oh, please! Bubbling with emotion, your work is as poetic as the finest literature. Your writing carried its ideas to the heart far better than any callous report. Would you please not demean yourself so?"

The dryad—unlike treants, they were humanfolk who were wholly independent of their birth trees—had evidently taken well to the nearly childlike level of praise, as his skin reddened slightly from its original mapleish tone. Although he looked like a young mensch on the outside, Agrippina's incisive gaze did not miss his mystic signature, which placed him somewhere in the neighborhood of his second century. Despite leaving his title of magus behind, the man was a continued patron of the School of Daybreak. In all likelihood, Lady Leizniz had nudged him her way; the methuselah and wraith now shared an interlinked fate, and this was the master offering her full support.

Agrippina had already conversed with over twenty contacts likely sent by the dean by this point. Some had clearly only introduced

themselves out of obligation, but others had been keen to look after a junior pupil; whatever their initial motivations, she was sure she'd won most of them over to her side.

One particularly notable authority who had at first made no effort to hide his displeasure had ended their conversation by taking her hand and introducing her to the leader of his own cadre, after which he went on to invite her to his daughter's upcoming birthday celebration. Clearly, she'd earned more favor than her position by the Emperor's side could provide alone. These episodes stacked up with every new person she met, and the former baroness-to-be confirmed that the skills she'd learned under her father had not rusted in the slightest.

After concluding with the dryad, Agrippina flagged a waiter and took a break with a glass of wine. As she sipped to wet her mouth, she noticed someone approaching from behind; she turned to see a most suspicious man.

"Von Ubiorum, I take it? Wit am—"

"Oh, Marquis Gundahar Joseph Nicolaus von Donnersmarck. I had planned to greet you myself, you know?"

The handsome fellow's soft, courteous smile fit him well, but anyone who knew his true nature would struggle to see it as anything more than a villain's facade. The grinning methuselah ignored Agrippina's overt faux pas—cutting off a peer's introduction was decidedly unmannerly—and bowed, saying, "It is as you say."

Agrippina believed this banquet was an examination: it was a complicated test wherein she was to separate friend from foe and come up with plans to make use of each.

However, those who could be marked as enemies before the papers were handed out called for special provisions. Here was the leading candidate in the battle of succession for House Ubiorum, sure to be less than hospitable to the thief who'd swiped the territory out from underneath him.

With such clear grounds for antagonism, Agrippina had made sure to do her homework before arriving. She'd scanned through the almanac of imperial aristocrats, gathered historical documents that touched on him, and even asked Lady Leizniz for information that might only circulate in noble spheres.

After all that, Agrippina had decided that her strategy of appearing as a helpless rabbit wouldn't suffice in front of her greatest opponent. This man was as unscrupulous as they came; making a show of how open to attack she was would do nothing to further her interests.

Instead, she took the stance of a novice who knew the scent of political games but not how to play them. Her actions betrayed a

certain level of research, plainly announcing, *You're an enemy, aren't you?* Acting like a failed schemer made for a more tantalizing mark than someone purely naive—that was common sense in this line of work...or at least, so she'd thought.

"You honor me, Miss Agrippina Voisin du Stahl—oh, how rude of me. I should refer to you as von Ubiorum. Forgive me for the offense."

Had Agrippina been any less experienced—or any more human—perhaps the mask would have cracked. The mention of a name that no one in the entire Empire should have known had *surprised* her.

Even the poorest pauper knew that the gentry liked to bequeath long lists of names to their own, and Agrippina was no exception. Fully expanded, her name contained over twenty individual names, but the only ones that held any meaning were that which her parents had first chosen and her family name. As such, she never bothered to make mention of any of the others, including in official settings: even her contract of ennoblement had identified her only as Agrippina du Stahl.

But Marquis Donnersmarck had uttered her baptismal name—one established by word of God in the land of Seine. Even in her motherland, she could think of few who might know it.

"No offense taken, Marquis Donnersmarck. It will take me some time yet to get used to my new name."

"Ah, Wit can sympathize. In my youth, it had sometimes taken me two mentions to realize Wit was being called—a great embarrassment, I know. Then perhaps, von Ubiorum, you might allow me the privilege of referring to you as Agrippina? It may be more comfortable for you, and with our neighboring territories, Wit hope to enjoy an intimate relationship with you."

Although Agrippina continued the conversation with a genteel giggle, she shrewdly gathered that his willingness to refer to an unwed lady by her name and subsequently take her hand pointed to a rather *playful* nature.

He was a rarity amongst their kind. Carnal pleasures proved generally superfluous when psychosorcery could suffice. Like Agrippina, most methuselah toyed with magic in their youths and then grew desensitized to the petty stimulation flesh could provide. The most convincing explanation was that this Donnersmarck character derived his pleasure not from physical means, but from the reactions of his partners.

Ah, Agrippina mused. She, too, used others for amusement; yet this man's proactive approach to drawing out entertainment from those around him was markedly different from her fondness for stories. *Irreconcilably so*, she thought.

They were simply polar opposites, fated not to share the same

earth under the heavens. Eventually, she was sure, some spark or another between them would evolve into full-blown malice. As she tiptoed around her inevitable archenemy's flirtations, one thought dominated her mind.

Now then, how shall I kill him?

[Tips] First-name-basis relationships between nobles are incredibly rare beyond genuine intimate ties. Generally, most opt to refer to their peers by family name or rank.

Winter of the Fourteenth Year

Politics

Systems of politics are indispensable when the main cast assume the positions of important kings or generals. Actions may include listening to the demands of the people, snooping around enemy states, or quelling domestic tensions. In systems like these, the players must determine who their enemy is before engaging in a climactic conclusion, lest their swords fall upon a mistaken target.

If you leave a person on the brink of death for long enough, they'll get used to living that way.

I'd absorbed that particular lesson in my past life from an old university classmate who'd gone on to work for a pretty terrible company. We'd gone out for drinks every now and again, and every time I'd wondered how he managed to get by waking up at five in the morning and taking the last train home every day without any notion of weekends or holidays.

Where I normally just consoled him and listened to his grievances, one night, we decided to hit up a second bar. After half a bottle of whiskey each, my tongue slipped, and I asked the question: "If things are so bad, why don't you leave?"

I didn't want to come off as boastful, but having been classmates, I knew his education and background were solid; on top of that, his commitment to this awful company meant his work history looked clean as well. Among our other close college-era friends were attorneys who'd survived law school, certified tax accountants, and licensed social-insurance consultants. With strong connections on both legal and financial fronts, it seemed likely that he could sue and win compensation for all the wrongful overtime they'd wrung out of him.

He'd known this just as well as I had, but his answer had caught me off guard.

"If you toss a frog in a boiling pot, I think it'll know it's gonna die... But even then, I don't think it can bring itself to make the effort to run. Who knows? Maybe whatever's beyond the water's just as bad, or worse."

I could no longer remember his name, but the feeble sight of his head slumped down on the edge of the bar curiously stuck with me in vivid detail. The bitterness of the memory outstripped any liquor—but

enough of that. I had my own godsawful job that I'd gotten used to.

At this point, a mountain of letters was fodder for my Independent Processing; my colleagues—that is, the government mediators sent to help with the madam's affairs—who had initially eyed me wondering who let a kid into the room now welcomed me when we worked together.

It seemed that people were hardwired to feel some level of sympathy when they witnessed a literal child earnestly working with bags under his eyes. A little bit of intrigue sufficed to uncover the villainy of many of my employer's enemies, and I had to admit it got to me a bit when swindlers as immoral as them pitied me enough to give me candy.

But my SAN points were oiling the machine nicely. Despite being surrounded by conspirators, pawning off what work I could assign to them still lightened my load. In fact, entrusting them with the madam's business lulled them into thinking they'd somehow earned our trust; by inviting them to be bolder in their plots, I streamlined the process of catching them later.

This process, put to use over the waning autumn months, had allowed me to all but finish labeling the actors at large in the Ubiorum domain. The broad strokes were that half of them were pretending to be loyal; twenty percent were clearly conspiring with outside powers but had kept their crimes small enough to remain beneath notice; another twenty percent were decent folk putting in their honest share to keep their territories afloat; and the last tenth were loyal vassals of the crown who swore fealty to the greater Empire as opposed to the old masters of the county.

Did I wander into hell?

You have no idea how abhorrent the tax reports we'd received had been. From the looks of things, news that the crown was going to relinquish the region and hand the reins to a new Count Ubiorum had come as just as much of a surprise to its residents as to everyone else. While there had been traces of an attempt to piece together something presentable, the final product had drawn out a peculiar groan from me, perhaps best rendered as, "Ughab?"

The lack of oversight in imperially protected territories and the subsequent laxity of those who exploited it was *blatantly* apparent. My relationship with economics only went as far as a midlevel Bookkeeping Certificate I'd earned as part of a college course, and even I could find clear falsehoods at every turn.

Liquid tax and population failed to match up as a matter of course, and the story wasn't any better when the reported earnings were compared to agricultural acreage. After crunching the numbers, I came across *several* cantons where I wanted to grab the local lords'

collars and ask if they'd somehow managed to let every single one of their residents starve while no one was looking.

Until now, it seemed as though they'd slipped under the radar by fudging the overall numbers and lining the pockets of the bureaucrats sent to hold them accountable. Unfortunately for them, the new count's financial advisory team reported directly to her—after all, the only two members were Chief Agrippina and Lackey Erich—rendering their trickery useless.

Had this been an empire-building simulation game, we could have immediately cut off our ties and their heads to replace the corrupt magistrates with new ones. The problem with that plan here was that we lacked an infinite gacha that turned money into lords; dispatching new rulers was too much of a hassle to start lopping off heads as we pleased.

As an aside, I think the severity of the issue can be made most apparent by stating that *Lady Agrippina*, a woman who'd anticipated next to nothing from her new territory, had furrowed her brow at the report.

This was a perfect example of the depths of depravity people could sink to without a watchful eye to stop them. Even a haphazard recalculation of projected earnings proved that the count should have been due at least double the actual sum. I could still muster a dry chuckle because I was just a retainer, but this wouldn't have been a laughing matter had I been the one in charge. Lady Agrippina's job was to turn this mess around and bolster the nation's bottom line; the road ahead was long.

Realistically, her best bet was to hang a few of them to prove she wasn't messing around. From there, she could whip the unmotivated into shape and replace those truly rotten with new blood. Removing too many troublemakers at once was liable to incite a revolt that would plunge the region into chaos; she would need to take her time and slowly put her people into place.

If all went well, I imagined it would take her, say...a quarter of a century? In mortal terms, that was an entire generation spent just turning a negative into zero; the futility of it all would make anyone bound by a life span lose heart. A business in this situation would just scrap the company and try again elsewhere.

So long as Lady Agrippina cast her lot with the Empire, she would be forced to deal with this hotbed of strife forever. As much as I could sympathize with her suffering, it wasn't as if *my* suffering were any less real.

"Are you *ready* yet?"

"Give me one more moment, please!"

I answered the madam's lifeless attempt to rush me from outside

the room and looked in the mirror to check over my appearance. Despite his deathly expression, the boy staring back at me was dressed in the best money could buy.

Today's outfit was a black pourpoint. I hid my neck with an ascot tie in lieu of the more fashionable ruff making the rounds these days, and had generally put myself together in outdated styles to emphasize my lower standing. Though nobles liked to dress up their hired help, maintaining at least a one-trend lag in terms of dress remained standard.

"Okay, clothes are good..."

Nothing was wrinkled, my collar was set, and the fabric was clean from tip to toe. I left no room for critique; none could fault me for coming short of the picture-perfect servant.

Now, you may be wondering why I was proactively stuffing myself into one of Lady Leizniz's gifts, and the answer was simple: work. Obviously, I'd never choose such an overstated fit of my own volition. My preference was simple shirts and pants with enough slack to move around in, particularly with pockets to conceal smaller tools, and comfort while unsheathing my sword in a fluid motion was icing on top. Alas, I couldn't exactly accompany the madam into the imperial palace looking like that, so I dredged up one of the finer sets of threads I did my best to keep hidden.

After confirming my attire was in order, I moved on to my face. I wasn't going to nitpick about the structure of my bones or whatever, but I'd made an effort not to look *bad*. Permanent bags had formed under my eyes, so I'd concealed them with a touch of powder; I resisted the natural outbreak of acne at my age every day with a carefully tailored diet. I'd even taken care not to allow any grime to turn into blackheads.

All right. Having taken a bath yesterday to scrub down whatever might remain on my face, I was looking as ready as could be. The final touch was to comb through my hair, applying a light coat of oil and tying it together near my neck. My bangs were manageable on account of regular trimming, so I swept them to the side and hooked the excess over my ear. Today's do was a simple one; I didn't have anything against the northern method of weaving together a bunch of separate braids, but that would take too long for my current schedule.

Despite being at the point where I wanted to cut off at least *some* of it, my recent attempt to do so had produced a fey protest—featuring alfar I'd never seen before, to boot—so I'd given up. I'd started growing it to earn their favor; it tracked to see that mission through until the end.

Well, if nothing else, I supposed that it was nice to be able to wrap a tuft of hair around the side of my neck in this cold weather.

Besides, it was stronger than it looked, and bundled up like this, it served as a bit of protection: I'd heard once that ancient warriors had grown out their manes as a last resort to dull enemy blades.

I did a final pass in the mirror, making sure to check my backside as well. No bedhead, no frayed edges, no shirt sticking out from my slacks—I was relieved to see that I wouldn't be mocked as unfit to trail behind my master in high society.

"What do you think, Elisa?"

"You look as wonderful as ever, Dear Brother."

And lastly, I made sure to get a second opinion. The madam's recent uptick in outings meant I'd begun to leave my dress clothes in a new wardrobe, here in Elisa's room. While the capital's roads were mostly paved, there was always the risk of dirt or mud stuck to someone's horses flicking off in the streets. Getting changed here was the safest bet, and it meant I could return to the atelier to answer an emergency summons without needing to go home and prepare.

As a result, I'd been intruding on Elisa's massive bed—the one Lady Leizniz had given her, with a canopy and everything—a lot lately, but I *needed* the sleep, so I asked that she put up with it.

But if I never went home at all, the Ashen Fraulein would sulk. It was getting difficult to fulfill my dual duties as a servant and as an individual: every problem solved teed up a new one elsewhere. I knew this was just the way of the world, but man, did I wish I had a cheat code for it.

Well, worries aside, I had work to do.

"You're late."

"My apologies."

Heading into the workshop proper, I found Lady Agrippina dolled up to breathtaking levels—assuming the hypothetical observer didn't know her character. She wore an ashen-white gown that accentuated the fairer tone of her skin, and the deep cut into her chest bared as much of it as possible. Counterintuitively, though, the design gave off a certain modesty; her long, flowing hair, gracefully set, paired with it to round off a thoroughly seductive impression.

I'd never seen her wear this sort of style before; perhaps it was indicative of an attempt to further refine her fashion sense. I supposed it only made sense: the grand ball being held in the imperial palace tonight was an occasion fit for the infamous Count Thaumapalatine Ubiorum to take center stage.

Lady Agrippina had already morphed into the main character of domestic politics, so maybe this was her attempt to branch out as the main character of an otome game. Frankly, my employer was the polar opposite of a wide-eyed, innocent heroine, better fit to play the part of a haughty villainess; though I supposed the kind of scoundrel

who could fend off the protagonist and her romantic interests all by herself had no business being the antagonist. How in the world was anyone expected to beat *her* for a happily ever after?

“Make sure not to forget your arms.”

“I am aware, madam.”

I couldn’t help but remain curious whether she’d amass an army of handsome men as her harem or as her opponents in battle, but I chased away the delusions to the back of my mind and slung the tool of the trade around my hip—I was a retainer *and* bodyguard, after all.

That’s right, I was now Lady Agrippina’s bodyguard. Here was an elite enemy that begged all manner of miracle to fell, and she needed a security detail, at least on the surface. Apparently not wanting to clue her adversaries in to her tremendous might, she refused to call for knights from home and added yet another set of responsibilities to my name with a casual, “You alone will do, won’t you?”

Isn’t that funny? You know, an ordinary count was supposed to be accompanied by a *squadron* of guards at any given time, but maybe I was misremembering.

At any rate, Lady Leizniz had gone out of her way to gift me a new scabbard—though one a bit too much form over function for my tastes—which I slipped onto my belt, Schutzwolfe and all. To digress for a moment, she’d also offered to prepare a more chic weapon for me despite looking worse for wear than usual, to which I had to politely refuse.

Utility aside, I didn’t want to be saddled with a rapier built aesthetics-first. Not only did it clash with my personal tastes, but my Hybrid Sword Arts training emphasized rough play involving the handle and handguard, and even extended to half swording. If I ever actually had to fulfill my role as a bodyguard, it would be much easier with a familiar weapon than an unfamiliar one; stabbing weapons had separate add-ons from one-handed swords, and my munchkin heart ached at the thought of throttling my damage potential.

“All right,” she said. “Shall we?”

The madam pushed up her hair without a word and I dutifully laid a fluffy white fur coat over her shoulders. Evening gowns were hardly enough to stay warm in winter. While magia like her could shrug off the weather with a barrier, it wouldn’t do to *look* cold wandering around without outerwear.

As such, I wrapped myself in a mantle of my own, produced as always by Lady Leizniz. The cloth draped only over my left side: it both toned down the threatening nature of the sword hidden underneath and protected my heart. Mystic embroidery lined the inside with enchantments resisting blades, impact, and changes in temperature to make for a wonderful final product. The idiosyncrasies

in the formulae evoked memories of the days when the dean had occasionally tutored me in magic; it seemed she'd prepared this for me with her own two hands.

As embarrassing as this design was to wear, I couldn't get over the practicality of its features and had ultimately failed to refuse it.

"I wish you a safe journey, Master."

"Mm. Well, I shall return before sunrise if I can. Don't forget your homework in my absence."

Elisa saw us off and we put the atelier behind us. That I felt a tinge of loneliness from her willingness to let us go proved that I really was a hopeless doter of a brother.

But even more curious than that was the sensation of carrying a sword on the streets of the city—I still couldn't get used to it. I steered Castor and Polydeukes over the bridge to the palace from the driver's seat of the cab. Krahenschanze's position as one of the four castles guarding the palace made the ride here a short one, but the sensation of being armed really made me feel out of place on days where I had to walk around town. My personal stature had remained the same, and yet the dizzying changes of those in my proximity threatened to disorient me entirely.

The imperial palace knew not of my troubles, and its heavenly white walls rejected the darkness of night as gloriously as ever. Countless spires pierced the skies, the torches within bleeding out from the terraces. The maniacal attention to detail required to ensure the building would maintain its majesty from any angle was such a ludicrous display of artistry that it overwhelmed my critical eye for beauty and left me drooling with a "Duhhh... Pretty."

Come to think of it, regularly coming and going from the *palace* was an unbelievable thing as an imperial citizen.

I stopped the carriage by the front parking lot beside countless other fabulous vehicles, helped Lady Agrippina get down, and followed her inside. The guards took one look at our cab's insignia—the Ubiorum crest of a dual-headed eagle holding a sword and scepter—and let us through. Apparently, the marking had an identification spell woven into it, allowing persons of importance to pass through without hassle.

The main hall was reminiscent of the throne room in that it was lined with spoils of war taken from defeated enemy nations in service of the Empire's historical grandeur. No matter how many times I saw this imposing scene, the overpowering majesty of it all continued to intimidate me.

Not only had magic been used to artificially expand the ceiling to bewildering heights, but every pillar, every article of furniture, and every inch of the ceiling had been covered in ornate designs. Yet

strangely enough, the masterful architects had managed to stop just short of the gaudiness seen in nouveau-riche displays of wealth.

Upon seeing my master to the palace's waiting room, my job was finished. From here, she would be accompanied by a fellow aristocrat into whatever meeting room or banquet hall the gathering was to be held in.

The Trialist Empire preferred for its nobles to be joined by an escort for formal occasions: the married were brought by their partners as a rule of thumb, and those unwed most often opted for family or friends of equal rank, or superiors with whom they were well acquainted. Seeing as Rhine wasn't an absolute patriarchy, the tradition could be traced back to the early ages of the Empire, where an introduction from a colleague was proof that one wasn't a complete outsider.

In those days, the country had still been a coalition of several distinct states, and every gathering was sure to include people completely unacquainted with one another. When suspicions of foreign ties could snowball into accusations of espionage, the tacit declaration that one was here in the good graces of a respected peer had been important enough to live on to the present day.

This custom meant that the palatial waiting room was a popular place to convene for pairs wanting to adhere to the rules of etiquette. Among its users were people averse to the thought of being picked up directly from home, but others like Lady Agrippina simply resided too close for a more personal rendezvous point to make any sense.

Having seen my master off, I started for the servants' holding room, only to see her pop right back out of the room with an escort in hand. He was a young audhumbla of imposing size and striking vigor; the stability of his gait betrayed a military background as opposed to a bureaucratic one.

The man's clothing was first rate—I was an expert at judging ensembles at a glance at this point—pointing to remarkable wealth. Still, his outfit was coordinated not to step on the toes of those who might outrank him; he was probably the eldest son of a wealthy, say, baron or thereabouts. Given the confidence he carried himself with, I saw him as a man of considerable pride.

Alas, the poor fellow's enthusiasm made it clear his intentions with Lady Agrippina were serious. I pitied him: he hadn't realized that none of the men who'd escorted her thus far had ever been called back for a second opportunity.

On every occasion where the madam visited the palace, she employed a new partner as company. The first had been a sleazy mensch who typified the word "playboy," and the next had been a methuselah handsome enough to make me envious. Other notable

choices included a goblin who'd looked like a child next to her and a siren whose avian heritage had confused me. If my assumptions were correct, this was her way of avoiding any pesky bonds from forming—a move taken straight from the playbook of an experienced hustler at a hostess bar.

As she left the scene, my master glanced my way and flashed me a wicked grin. I saw her off once more and then quickly made my way over to the holding room, making sure to whisper a request to the unwilted rose hidden in my palm as I slipped inside.

The privileged sphere had been a sight to see, but this was quite the exhibit itself: I felt like I'd wandered into a museum of pretty boys and girls. Despite its moniker, the servants' section was every bit as spacious as the upper crust's waiting room, and it was crawling with beauty of every form—to the point where I felt awkward placing myself among them.

The wealthy were ever prone to employing winsome people. I wasn't aware of any particular historical impetus for this cultural tendency, but I suspected the simple answer of human nature sufficed to explain in this case. After all, I'd heard of some who went so far as to retain generation after generation of attractive vassals to cultivate whole clans of thoroughbred servants.

I made my way to the corner of what was basically a full-fledged salon and took a seat on a sofa, contenting myself to hide away with Ursula's protection as I waited for the madam to be done. The butlers and maids waiting here passed the time in insulated groups, proving the solidity of factional bonds even in this lower caste of high society.

These sorts of connections were probably of great importance: vital political information could very well come from lowly lips. However, I had no mind to familiarize myself with any of them, nor did I want them to come to me.

My master had explicitly warned me not to get too friendly, you see. I had no doubt this was an effort to bolster the legitimacy of her fake persona. Agreeable nobles would see my isolation and take pity, offering to introduce the madam to attendants who would one day take my place; those who were less charitable might have their prejudices about the ignorant foreign lady reinforced.

For my part, I was very grateful for her consideration. By this time next year, I was likely to be leaving this job in the dust.

Around the time of assuming her title as count thaumapalatine, Lady Agrippina had expanded Elisa's curriculum to formal magical theory. My sister's recent command of manners had convinced the madam that she had mastered the basics.

Although Elisa had been instructed in simple mana sinks for quite some time, she was beginning to explore more technical knowledge

about the construction of spells and cantrips that went right over my head. The arcane talent afforded to me by my blessing was fundamentally an intuitive process; what she was learning was forged in reason and cast in logic. I could theoretically come to understand the material if I invested more experience into magecraft, but the depths of knowledge she was marching into were uncharted territory.

To clarify the chasm between us, I was like a driver who'd passed a normal driving exam, and Elisa was learning the machine's workings from the inside out. She had to know how every part worked, how they came together, and the techniques a driver could use to affect them, and at the end of it all, she would eventually race in a circuit against other experts to come out on top.

Seeing as my employment would end with Elisa's enrollment, I had no need to involve myself in political games. In fact, the madam had made an offhand comment that I was probably best off doing everything in my power to avoid them; I was more than happy to oblige.

While I'd already made a few ties with the government agents involved in the Ubiorum succession, they were flimsy enough to cut by never seeing them again. I'd been as happy as I was astounded Lady Agrippina was looking out for me: I didn't want to catch too many eyes and have to weasel my way out of a job offer I couldn't refuse after retiring as her retainer. Of course, when I'd let my surprise show on my face, she yanked my ear with an Unseen Hand, but that had proven to be a good memory in hindsight.

Alas, there wasn't much I could do if someone had already set their sights on me.

At the turn of the season, I'd heeded my master's advice and invested in an V: Adept Sympathetic Barrier, and I felt something snag on it. Someone had managed to flag me down in spite of my fey guardian and was engaging in a bout of mischief.

Ursula had been lazing about underneath my mantle, but got up with a pout as soon as she noticed. I knew she wasn't giving it her all for this everyday request, but the svartalf seemed miffed at the thought that someone had challenged her ability to conceal.

Well, I guessed being targeted was a matter of course. My master was the infamous count palatine that the Emperor had welcomed with flourish and fanfare, appearing out of the blue from a foreign land to win Collegiate professorship with a cutting-edge thesis. No method of gathering intel was off the table, and a seemingly inexperienced servant boy made for a particularly juicy target.

Woe was me. I'd steeled myself to be swept up in the madam's dealings, of course, but how brazenly she'd used me as a decoy highlighted just how miserable my state of employment was.

Then again, mental attacks were far more gentlemanly than being ganked in a dark alleyway, so I supposed I could let it slide. I'd received a rather passionate invitation the other day, you see: I'd been leisurely making my way home from the market when someone suddenly tried to pull me into the backstreets.

I ask that you infer the fate of the culprits by my quietly sitting here in good health.

Hey, come on, I hadn't *killed* them. They might struggle in work or daily life henceforth, but I'd let them off with all four limbs still attached; as far as I was concerned, they'd paid their dues with a bit of experience.

To begin with, jumping a literal child with a crew of six grown men was outright immature. I know I was Lady Agrippina's only servant and all, but it wasn't like I had any dirt on the woman, anyway. The closest I came was my knowledge that her stunning looks were a gilded veneer hiding a core of concentrated indolence, that she forwent the act of dressing herself when lazing about her abode, and that even when she did wear something, it was often a nightgown that she brazenly let a tit or two spill out of.

Er, actually, that was pretty terrible. My old world had seen slovenly beauty expanded into a popular character archetype, but the people of this world would genuinely recoil with disgust if the truth got out.

While thinking through all this, I'd been ready for a follow-up offensive at any moment...but it never came. I couldn't sense any approaching shadows or uninvited stares with my Presence Detection; it looked like whoever the offender had been wasn't keen on repeating their impoliteness.

I whispered to the puffy-cheeked alf, asking her to mask me again with a little more strength. Crossing my legs again, I rested my weight on the armrest. If they weren't going to bother me further, I would simply kill time with my hobby. Armed with an unexpected payday, I summoned my character sheet to dive into the realm of possibility.

To be perfectly honest, I had a serious issue to tackle: the clock was ticking, and the trait that enabled my whole build was due for recall—my time as a Child Prodigy was almost up.

[Tips] Escorts in the imperial sense traditionally offer their left hand to the escortee, who reciprocates by lightly putting weight on them as the pair walks together. There is no expectation that men are always to be the escort, and indeed, the inverse is often true.

This is an extension of the imperial hesitance to refer to a lady at the helm of a noble house as Countess Such-and-Such as

opposed to Count Such-and-Such, or Duchess So-and-So as opposed to Duke So-and-So. Positions within the social hierarchy supersede gender in Rhine.

Toxins concealed by smiles and daggers carried on the softest words painted a gorgeous scene if one looked no further than the surface. Youths unacquainted with the ways of the world aspired to stand at the center of these upper-stratum parties; beggars aching in the throes of poverty were taken by murderous rage at the luxuries fit to feed them for years.

Yet those who knew the truth felt no such appeal. How astonished the uninitiated would be to find that the shimmering decorations of high society did little to allay the thick acid smog that dominated its atmosphere, only permitting abominations resilient enough to swim the murky waters of a heavy-metal ocean to remain.

“This is merely a personal opinion, but I have some difficulty agreeing fully with the new Emperor’s intended course. While I agree that the reorganization of our forces would be most efficient with an accompanying policy of demilitarization...”

A handsome audhumbla navigated a trending topic, making sure to emphasize his military expertise and come across as a capable man. The tragedy of the scene was perhaps at its clearest when observing the stunning woman listening to him: though she made her attraction known without reservation, his opinions failed to draw out even an ounce of interest.

After arriving at the evening ball, Agrippina had given her partner for the night no more than a fraction of her attention at any time. She was beautiful, favored by His Imperial Majesty, and perfectly poised to alter national history as count thaumapalatine; the young man was desperate in his attempt to woo her. Alas, his sincerest attempt came short of arousing her curiosity.

This wasn’t to say that the man was a trivial nobody that Agrippina could afford to neglect entirely. He was the heir to a powerful barony that boasted marital links to an electorate house, and despite his youth, had made a heroic name for himself by putting down ne’er-do-wells in the east. The words that came out of his mouth carried the scent of intelligence: even his criticism of the Emperor was reasonable—if a bit loudly spoken—and could be considered correct from a purely militaristic perspective.

While methuselah ideals of beauty tended to fall in line with mensch standards, it was clear enough for Agrippina to see that the ungulate ladies in attendance were glaring her way with great envy; he must have been quite the looker as well.

Yet none of that mattered. Frankly, he was nothing more to her

than a ticket to take part in tonight's event without incident.

Agrippina had concealed her everyday misanthropy expertly of late. She wove into tea parties and out of ballrooms, riding the waves of the upper crust in a bid for information; as she picked out friend from foe, she took great pains to collect new allies wherever she could. As such, the count could not afford to break the rules of conduct. Every outing called for a partner worthy of accompanying her, and she selected based solely on those criteria.

In this narrow way, the audhumbla gentleman was the perfect escort. He was sufficiently accomplished in war—that is, enough not to be looked down on by their peers—came from a reputable house, was attractive enough to deny that she'd only chosen him for his stature, and had promising prospects for the future.

For now, Agrippina would keep him close, but at arm's length. She would call upon him again after some time had passed to maintain interest, and he was respectable enough that she might even pull him into her orbit in the long term. But at present, there were more important matters to attend to.

A bespoke divination piped the clamorous conversations that filled the room into her ear, sifting through the rough to uncover diamonds of gossip. The nifty little tools that she employed to slip past the palace's antithaumaturgic barrier from the inside had been quite the undertaking to procure, but that was proof of how valuable the intel to be gained here was.

Agrippina was keenly aware of her place in the public eye: show up, and she would become the center of conversation. She was bait and hook in one, teasing out fragmented rumors from every corner of the crowd to piece together a greater collage of consensus—meaningless alone, each morsel of information added to the panorama.

For example, a group of wives had taken their place in the corner of the hall; one of them watched Agrippina merrily chat with the young officer and smiled. Though it lasted for but an instant, it was decidedly not a friendly look: the curled corners of her lips had been a sneer to ridicule the newly ennobled count. Beside her, the other women in her entourage put on a show of chastising her. Yet in truth, they, too, were enjoying the mockery.

At a glance, this was an ordinary scene of a group putting down a notorious character out of their reach in the name of self-satisfaction. However, a closer inspection of their identities was key to navigating the tides of the upper crust.

That wasn't to say Agrippina was keeping a book of names of all those who'd laughed at her. Her sole objective in diving into the intricacies of interpersonal politics was to gather the requisite

intelligence to bring down her juiciest marks.

On a personal level, she couldn't have cared less what they had to say. As much as she couldn't stand being underestimated by someone she considered her equal, being used to prop up an inferior person's pride was a different matter—it was less insulting and more pitiful. Glaring back was the act of a charlatan with too much time on her hands; the methuselah was content to let them be and scoff inside at how base they proved to be.

“Ah,” the audhumbla said, “it seems the music has begun.”

“Indeed it has. I wonder what band has been called to play tonight.”

In the blink of an eye, the musicians had switched from quiet background music to an upbeat tune. Thus far the pieces played had been nothing more than white noise to drown out the murmur of the crowd, but this melody invigorated the young ladies and gentlemen present to take to the dance floor.

These sorts of dance songs were thrown in at regular intervals throughout the night, and it was up to the participants to choose whether they wished to dance. But of course, a young man hardly wished to give up the opportunity to take the hand of a woman so lovely.

“What do you say, Count Ubiorum? Will you please have this...
Hrm.”

As the audhumbla reached out to invite the dazzling methuselah to join him, he noticed a little dot crawling on the white of her dress. The offender was a simple ladybug, incomparably beneath him, but the audacity it displayed by desecrating a maiden's body soured his mood. He smoothly reached to flick it away, when a set of slender fingers gently came to stop his own muscled hand.

“Count Ubiorum?”

“An insect's life is just as precious as our own. The poor thing's only crime was to wander here unaware; don't you think it would be sad to crush it for so little?”

“Oh, well, of course.”

“And now that I see it more closely, it's rather cute. Don't you agree?” Fair and delicate, Agrippina's hand offered the ladybug a pathway; the tiny critter quietly crawled on, made its way to the apex of her fingers, and flew away. With a giggle, she added, “It seems we've managed to do the world a little good tonight.”

“No, Count Ubiorum, the good done is all yours. I'm sure that ladybug will remember this debt and return to you in some form or another to repay it.”

“My, a reference to the old fairy tale, I take it? How wonderfully nostalgic.”

The innocent smile of a maiden too kind to diminish the weight of an insect's life cleansed the warrior's heart, mending scars it had endured being buffeted by the harsh sands of the battlefield. Utterly taken by her apparent sweetness, the audhumbla once again requested a dance, and she graciously accepted.

It was for the best that he didn't know the truth.

The insignificant beetle he'd just let escape was, in fact, the count's new toy—one she'd brazenly pestered the Emperor to "loan" her. They were arcane life-forms expressly bred for covert reconnaissance.

These ladybugs were familiars that acted in swarms, and despite their inability to carry complex formulae suited for combat or assassination, they came with one unique renovation. Each individual unit was no different from a natural ladybug, save for its ability to share mystic codes with its master through physical touch; this delivery method leaked zero mana, allowing it to operate in antimagic fields and duck under search spells. More tangibly, their mission was to take the place of eavesdropping magic, instead recording all the sounds they took in and delivering the data to their master at regular intervals.

In a stroke of misfortune, this particular unit had been found by Agrippina's escort when it came back to report.

Thankfully, the ingenuity of this design was that discovery posed no problems. Aristocrats who encountered a bug were more than likely to avert their eyes or, at most, blow it away with a fan. The only people who'd bother smooshing one were men who felt socially obligated to do so; no one wanted to ruin their handcrafted silk gloves over a mere insect.

They were the perfect spies for the occasion. Minor details—like how ladybugs were known to hide away from the winter weather, making it perfectly natural to see one indoors—proved that their inventor had been a talented intellectual who'd risen to power via skill and not on his family name.

Agrippina put the unfading fruits of her childhood dance lessons to use, whisking the warrior away to a dreamy land of fancy. She had the men looking on weak at the knees, and the women by their sides puffing in frustration; by the end of her stellar performance, she gracefully bowed to the audience.

The next piece started right away. Wanting to relive the euphoria, the young man tried to invite his partner to continue—alas, another man had come to ruin his day. The intruder did not bother reading the room, but it didn't matter, as he was too eminent for anyone to rebuke him for a breach of etiquette. The audhumbla had no choice but to stand down.

“What a coincidence to see you, Agrippina. To think you’d be at tonight’s ball.”

“My, Marquis Donnersmarck!”

Clad in the finest threads and entering the scene with a comically cheerful smile was one Marquis Donnersmarck. He was wearing this winter’s new hotness: ethnic garb of the desert dwellers that resided along the Eastern Passage. Woven in silk and dandified for imperial tastes, the fusion of foreign and domestic fashion fit him well.

Shrinking at the appearance of a social superior, the audhumbla merely asked, “Are you two close?”

Unfortunately so, Agrippina wished to reply. But of course, one wouldn’t know it from how merrily she celebrated the occasion of meeting a friend as good as Marquis Donnersmarck.

[Tips] Antithaumaturgic barriers impede the use of magecraft within their active range. Their permanent fixture in the imperial palace is the pride of the School of Polar Night. Their work counters nearly all magic, hindering outside attempts at assassination, spying, and wanton violence.

However, many nobles regularly carry mystic items on their person; as a result, most implementations simply prevent formulae from affecting the environment beyond their containers. This is also an artifact of how many arcane tools are used to repair the palace and run the Empire.

I had many traits that were critical for my build, but Child Prodigy was far and away the most important.

To speak broadly, skills and equipment that came with experience modifiers were fairly commonplace in modern video games. The foundation of this design philosophy lay in the framework of fighting enemies of constantly rising levels by perennially staying one step ahead: it was the muscle-headed idea that challenges could be bulldozed through with raw numerical power. Saving time on the grinding aspect of an RPG allowed the player to let their level do the talking, and by my estimate, it was a strategy that most people had tried at some point or another.

However, tabletop games were different: abilities that bumped up experience gain or shrank the cost of leveling were next to nonexistent. When level-boosting skills *did* show up, they primarily made random stat gains trend toward higher values or added a flat bonus to support growth. There was an unwritten rule at play that dictated that the entire party was to develop at the same pace.

This went without saying, but unlike video games, the mechanics of a TRPG were carried out by warm-blooded—though you might not

want to believe it with how coldhearted some of them were—GMs and players. The inherent cooperation required begat a desire for fair play.

Exceptions did exist—important PCs could be propped up on stilts for lore-related reasons—but ultimately, the growth of each character was tuned to be roughly equal with that of their peers. Otherwise, the balance of the scenario was at risk of upheaval, each encounter being fodder for the strongest member of the party to solve on their lonesome. It was precisely to avoid this issue that we drafted our avatars together, played through the story as a group, and generally lacked the option to augment our experience gain.

Of course, that begged the question: What was the deal with my Child Prodigy trait? Personally, I believed it was a bit of flavor to round out the setting. If there were two characters of the same level but far apart in age, a player might ask why an old man only had the same amount of experience as a child—was he just *that* incompetent? Its existence seemed like an excuse, deliberately inserted to dodge such accusations.

And that was probably why Child Prodigy did exactly what it said on the tin: it only lasted until I came of age at fifteen.

Still, the trait had served me well. Practically speaking, I didn't have any real limits to my growth, so I would have to be an absolute noob *not* to take something that padded my lifetime experience gains. If I'd skipped it, I would never have reached Scale IX in my early teens; at this point, I'd be stuck with the modest skill set afforded by two-thirds of my current build.

All this time, I'd been living with this dread...of the day these tall, tall stilts came off. I'd gotten used to this reinforced income, and was sure my ordinary paydays would disappoint me going forward. There were plenty of tales printed in short booklets that talked about how impossible satisfaction seemed after a life-changing level of *stimulation*...

Oh, dammit. My mind was drifting off in *that* direction again. Once I was done with this issue, I'd need to find a way to rein in my pubescent body.

Anyway, as a self-proclaimed munchkin, I hadn't been resting on my laurels without considering how to circumvent the Child Prodigy time limit. While I admit that it had slipped my mind amidst the busyness—let me comment that the lack of a friendly reminder to notify me the end was coming was highly inconsiderate—I'd been scouring my blessing for a good replacement ever since I was a kid.

Thankfully, I had a strong budget to work with. Although serving Lady Agrippina had forced me into a lot of purchases to keep up, the constant, extreme stress of the job paid its costs back with interest.

Ghostwriting for my master had led me to purchase High Palatial

Speech at an III: Apprentice level—which, by the way, was worth as much as *five* tiers of other highly desirable skills—alongside Elegant Penmanship and Speed Writing to enable good work, fast. I also needed to play my part as a retainer properly, so I dipped my toes into the skills I'd taken to play foxes-and-geese for the first time in nearly a decade. Bringing up Stealth and Perception Block to Scale V, I also invested in the Silent Clothing trait to make sure I didn't produce any undue noise.

Factoring in the miscellaneous knowledge I needed to get by in high society, I'd almost bottomed out my savings. However, the work that followed was as difficult as it was delicate, and my sleepless nights of slogging through it had just barely eked out an overall margin of profit. To tell the truth, the psychological fatigue was so great that this small amount of interest wasn't enough to pay off the massive debt in the exchange...but I'll leave that aside for now.

Yet even with enough experience to make a snap purchase, it was hard to decide on what to invest in.

The outset of the issue lay with how Savant—the direct successor to Child Prodigy—was a specialized trait that was incompatible with my goals. Savant's defining gimmick was that, unlike its predecessor, it only reduced the costs of acquisition for skills and traits within a given field. When dealing in a specific field of study, the discount was steep enough to attain Scale IX mastery at relatively affordable prices. On top of that, while it required me to commit to a single area of expertise, doing so didn't lock me into that alone. I could theoretically simultaneously become a Swordplay Savant and Magecraft Savant, which was quite the powerful combo.

Had this been where it ended, it would have been a perfectly acceptable replacement despite its high cost to entry; I would have been happy to turn off my brain, pay up front, and ride out a broken build. But note that this was only true if it had actually ended there.

The Savant trait came with one *major* drawback: once the area of specialization was chosen, *all other abilities* were subject to a “large increase in cost.” This was a stark refutation of my desire to remain flexible, and a flaw that I couldn't ignore.

They say that the truly brilliant are oftentimes catastrophic failures in other aspects of life. Despite inventing the theory of general relativity, Einstein had been quite the philanderer in his personal life; Neumann may have invented the digital computer, but he'd been a strange fellow to put it lightly; while the electronic infrastructure built on the back of Tesla's findings was impressive, the man himself had lived like he'd been receiving cryptic transmissions from outer space.

All this to say that the Savants of the world were, by and large, very “unique” characters outside their fields of interest, and that the

skill reflected that. Taking this into account, I evaluated the trait as still being strong, but as unfit to sculpt a finished arcane swordsman who solved all his problems with DEX. While I could've sucked it up and gone with Magecraft Savant if my end goal were to become a College professor, my desire to adventure made its benefits far less efficient.

...*What was that?* Now I felt like *I* was getting signals from beyond, begging me not to go down that route.

Uh... It's probably my imagination. With how solidly developed my identity already was, I doubted one new trait would throw my personality out of order; it wasn't as though my physical growth spurt was being mirrored in my mind. It was a bit too late for me to start living with pigeons and spending every waking moment trying to memorize the phone book front-to-back.

Moving on, the next contender was a trait called Brilliant Mind. This was a replica of Child Prodigy, but strictly worse. Although it bumped experience gains across the board, the bonuses weren't even worth comparing to Savant's cost reduction.

A prodigy at ten was talented at fifteen, and by twenty they were just average; living through each step in the adage was a painful experience. I knew learning was a process that grew more difficult with age, but the world's willingness to conform to the old saying showed just how merciless it was.

Also of note was the interpretation that a Brilliant Mind intent to stay a generalist would never match the feats of a dedicated Savant. The message was that those who found one pursuit to devote their lives to could go a step beyond...but as someone whose career was entrenched in violence, the thought of facing an unbeatable Savant in battle was terrifying.

I knew the GM in charge would never take the time to consider balancing their game—I'd learned that painful lesson early, when I'd been thrown into an unwinnable fight with an overpowered mage to save Elisa. Had Lady Agrippina not strolled along to save us, not an atom of either of us siblings would have remained.

At any rate, my searching had failed to produce any satisfying answers. Every option came with pros and cons, and the system didn't allow me to mindlessly take everything to shore up the weaknesses introduced by one trait with another.

For example, Forgotten Talent came with bonuses that rivaled that of Child Prodigy, but the wording implied that it came with a serious blow to the unrecorded stat of luck. Much like how I'd looked through necromantic skills in my youth and suspected that they might come with an unwritten inability to live peacefully as a functioning member of society, my blessing refused to enumerate the hazy side effects any

ability might come with. I figured this was the game designers' divine proclamation that I was to think for myself without relying entirely on my blessing.

Other than that, I'd found Brightest Star, which bolstered experience gain in my twenties and significantly hampered it past that point—the poetic root, of course, implying that I was to burn out quickly. Late Bloomer was quite the opposite, only kicking in past thirty, when my mensch body would be out of peak condition.

Gee, the playtesters and QA team sure have done a good job.

I was beginning to think the heroes that had run amok in the Age of Gods might have been the result of living under a system that predated the revisions that fixed these errata. The thought that converting rocks to bread, infinitely duplicating fish, and moving mountains with pure muscle were the result of rules exploits was highly convincing.

In which case, I wondered what edition of the world I was playing on. While the challenge of breaking a polished, up-to-date system wide open spoke to my power-gaming soul, there was something special about letting loose in a ruleset full of holes.

...You know, just sitting here while thinking about the possibilities wasn't going to get me anywhere. It wasn't as if I was garnering any attention, so it wouldn't hurt to look through the rule book for a bit. Besides, immersing myself in a sea of data would be an easy way to pass the time.

Oh, how about this? My eye quickly wandered to Oathsworn: it was a trial wherein I made a pledge to some cause, and was rewarded with experience for seeing it through. It was similar to a Celtic geas, which gave divine protection so long as the oath was kept, but conferred even greater punishment if it was ever broken; in this case, the trait boosted income for relevant activities while paying out at the end of a time limit if the pact was seen through.

This could be it.

What if I swore to uphold the image of an adventurer—to maintain the dignity of a wayfarer who would one day be written into the canon of saga? As conventional as it was, the heroes of epics were gallant, and their paths filled with tribulations. Even if I lost heart and gave up—or worse, died—my failure would mean I wouldn't have much need for future experience.

Ah, but wait. I knew myself, and I knew that at some point, I would be overcome with the urge to stoop low in the name of efficacy. Creeping up on a sleeping foe and riding off into the sunrise was standard fare for an adventurer; groveling for mercy while looking for an opening was our common sense; I had a criminal record of hoodwinking GMs into killing off their own final bosses in dialogue

scenes. There was a real chance I'd accidentally break the contract in the heat of the moment.

It seemed the safest option was to avoid major commitments by investing in a Brilliant Mind, and pivoting into Late Bloomer when the time came to keep my momentum going. I mean, now that I was thinking about it, swearing an oath was just *begging* to die from a malicious interpretation. I felt like the heroes of Celtic lore were categorically worse for wear because of how their own geasa were used against them.

However, that left my twenties—the peak of my physical form—a little lacking in my eyes... *Wait, what's this? "Limelit?"*

Spotting the unfamiliar title at the bottom of my menu, I opened it to find something rather intriguing. Although Limelit was listed alongside other experience-point-modifying traits, it didn't do anything to bolster rates or discount prices. Instead, it converted the opinions of those around me into experience, regardless of whether their feelings were of trust and praise or of terror and fear.

In simpler terms, I would gain experience that scaled with my *fame*.

Soon enough, I was going to become an adventurer—someone constantly evaluated by others. The opinions of my companions went without saying, but the contractors who requested my help, contacts at the Adventurer's Association, and the residents of the lands I worked in would all come to know me. If I managed to pull off an adventure worthy of the books and had it sung by minstrels throughout the land...

This is great! It didn't come with any drawbacks, and since its bonuses hinged on my putting in effort to sell my name, it was cheap; I could pick up both Limelit and Brilliant Mind for less than any variant of Savant. All in all, the combination of the two seemed like the perfect fit for my situation.

I wasn't a fan of standing out for the *wrong* reasons, but I loved being recognized for a job well done. Yes, I won't hide it: I had ambitions of pulling off a feat of greatness in this lifetime that would be worthy of immortalization in the form of a saga.

All right, that settles that. The traits with trade-offs were just too niche for my liking, and I doubted I'd find anything better than this without giving up some reliability.

Poring over rule books really was a fantastic time. Not only did it bring new discoveries, but it came with wonderful moments where my memory sprang to life to say, "Wait, wouldn't this synergize *insanely* well with this other thing?"

Man, what a productive session.

Content with myself, I turned my head up to the ceiling in an

attempt to stretch my neck...and locked eyes with someone.

Two amethyst eyes were looking down at me. Her burning orange hair and affectless features were so well put together that they ironically lacked any impression at all. Good-looking yet utterly devoid of emotion, the olive-tanned girl used the many, *many* legs lining her massive trunk to dexterously cling to the ceiling and stare at me.

Perhaps the most well-known of the noodly kiths would be the lamia indigenous to the inland sea to the south, but she was no lamia. Covered by sensitive extensions of her coat, her lower half was that of a centipede, and one that vastly outsized its natural counterpart at that. Half-mensch and half-bug, she hailed from a demihuman race known as the sepa.



Even in the melting pot that was the imperial capital, they were a rare breed—so much so that this was my first time ever meeting one. Much like arachne, their ancestral origins began near the Southern Sea, but had branched out all over the world; the key difference was that they fared poorly in colder climates, and thus most had settled into the warmer parts of the Empire. I wondered why someone like her was up so far north.

But of course, one look at her immaculate attire left no room for confusion. She was like me: an attendant, here to serve or protect her master here in the palace.

Still, even as someone who was used to dealing with all sorts of demihumans, I nearly yelped in terror. The surprise of seeing someone in a spot that no normal person ought to occupy had stacked on top of the striking impact of her appearance. I wasn't going to deny that she was pretty, mind you. But the intimidation of a trunk several times larger than her upper body tapering off into an aggressive tail—I later learned they were just her final legs—beneath layers of skirtlike fabric was something else.

“Uh...” I made an ass of myself by freezing for a moment and following up with, “Good evening?”

I know, I know. But let me just ask this: Was there *anything* I could have said other than this?

“Good evening,” she replied. “A lovely night, isn't it?”

She dropped down from the ceiling without a single sound, though a quiet *slink* would have fit perfectly. It was evident that she had clearly perceived me in spite of Ursula's protection.

I wasn't sure whether she was using some kind of magic or miracle, or whether she was a scout that was just *that* attentive. Either way, the important lesson was that I couldn't let my guard down around her.

“Yes, well, I suppose it is a nice, peaceful night...but may I ask for which noble house you work? I don't believe we've met.”

Seeing as we'd already exchanged greetings, I couldn't exactly ignore her now. I sat upright on the sofa to address her properly, to which she responded by taking a seat in a chair, deftly wriggling her lower half around so that she sat at roughly the height a mensch would.

“You are correct. This is our first meeting, and I found myself a touch too absorbed in observing an unfamiliar face. I sincerely apologize for my rudeness.”

“No, you have *my* apologies for the unconcealed surprise. I am but a clumsy farmer's boy, and I pray that you might have it in you to forgive me.”

“Then let’s say our misconduct was equal and leave it at that.” After a pause, she said, “I am a servant to Marquis Donnersmarck. He and I both should hope to get along with you. May I ask whoever it might be that *you* serve?”

The girl’s eloquent palatial speech took the structure of a servile variant, and her pronunciation was pitch perfect, but there was one thing that bothered me...

Her mouth *wasn’t moving*.

Ventriloquism was an art I’d seen even before reincarnating, but I didn’t understand why she was bothering to employ it. However, in spite of my misgivings, I pressed on and introduced myself while entertaining the possibility that a racial quirk necessitated it. With how far the conversation had progressed, I had no choice but to answer honestly; one question posed to someone who knew the truth was enough to peg me as Lady Agrippina’s attendant.

“I am Erich of Konigstuhl, servant to Count Agrippina von Ubiorum.”

“Ah... So you’re from House Ubiorum.”

The utter lack of a reaction hinted to me that she’d approached me knowing my identity from the outset. I felt less like I was being appraised and more like I was being hunted.

After exchanging another two or three rounds of small talk, the door to the room opened, and a palace servant announced Count Ubiorum’s intent to retire for the night. Only a select few individuals could employ communications magic on the premises, giving rise to physical messengers like these.

I glanced at the time and found that it had slipped away from me at a rapid pace. Solving the dilemma of how I would replace Child Prodigy had really bogged me down, it seemed—which then made me wonder: How long had she been watching me from the ceiling?

Thinking that I had no enemies here—or that they’d at least be unable to break the rules of the *palace*—I’d let myself get too comfortable. Permanent Battlefield was strong, but it wasn’t impervious; it would do to keep my master’s position in society in mind and carry myself accordingly. Even if I died because I lacked the strength to defend myself, I wanted to make sure I went out holding my sword at the ready. Being stabbed in the back was the most shameful way a swordsman could go out.

“If you’ll excuse me, my master is calling.”

“Of course. Apologies again for surprising you. May we meet again.”

Pulling myself together, I stood up and said my farewells, only for her poker face to waver for the first time since meeting. Her lips parted in a faint smile that let a tiny sliver of her mouth peek through,

but what flashed through were not teeth...but mandibles, neatly tucked inside.

Ah, I see. She must have been trained to speak without exposing the intimidating presence of her jaw. It seemed likely that a noble might consider it inelegant to allow something so frightening to show.

Oh, this is bad. Things are looking bad, Lady Agrippina. I'd been marked by an obviously talented scout—nay, she better fit the image of an *assassin*. Our enemies were just raring to get this show on the road...

[Tips] Sepa are a demihuman race that come from the tropical areas near the Southern Sea. While they can be found all over the globe, their presence is a rarity in the North's icy climate. Their most notable characteristic is their long, segmented trunks, which boast a great number of legs, enabling them to scurry about whether on flat ground or sheer bluffs.

Equipped with a second jaw—known as a mandible—protruding from the insides of their mouths, they can crack incredibly hard shells and carapaces to facilitate their omnivorous diets. Some subgroups can inject venom with this inner bite, which has led certain migrant groups within the Trialist Empire to develop a culture of hiding their fangs whenever possible.

A gorgeous pair moved rhythmically to an elegant melody in triple meter, drawing one another close; yet even in the face of their opposite's beauty, the couple's dance was merely the backdrop for their conversation.

"This year's winter is a cold one indeed. The weather brings hope for a great bounty next spring."

"Oh, is that so? I was unaware that harsh winters are prone to give way to ample harvests."

"Yes, for the frigid cold that coats the earth kills a great deal of the vermin who burrow in its shallows. The lack of pests to pick away at produce allows for greater yields."

At first glance, this was a joyous scene: the young lady, welcomed into noble spheres with red carpets but otherwise lacking in basic knowledge, was receiving a word of sagacious advice from an experienced lord. Alas, the reality of the situation was nothing more than a pair of liars groping for the other's real intentions.

Agrippina was a voracious reader who powered through any book that came her way; pastoral writing had been a mainstay of her literary diet. The memoirs of career agriculturalists reflecting on their work had left her with more vocational knowledge than the average

farmhand getting by without much thought.

On the other hand, Marquis Donnersmarck knew that drawing attention to what a talented actress the count proved to be would be uncouth. Not wanting to paint himself as the villain—it was clear whom the other gentlemen present would choose to defend between a handsome yet dubious man and a dazzlingly beautiful woman—he simply smiled and played along.

A private exchange might offer the opportunity to scope out flaws to be picked at, but they both wore cordial masks when in public. Although they were mutually aware that their attempts to feign innocence failed to work on one another, the need to keep up their airs with everyone else meant the show must go on.

“How lovely—you have me excited for the spring. A bountiful field of wheat cradled by the wind bobbing this way and that is such a wondrous sight.”

“The overflowing vitality of crops reaching up for the skies is a fantastic scene indeed, Agrippina. We have a villa back home with quite the view of the plains... What say you come to visit next summer to get away from the heat?”

The marquis wove in an invitation; it signaled their intimacy to those listening in and probed at her schedule without having to ask outright.

Agrippina could have sidestepped the question, escaping into the safety of ambiguity, but she didn't. No, she deliberately chose to rock the boat; tidying up all her problems in one fell swoop was her key to good fortune. When tasked with waking the lethargic fools cluttering a bedroom, the best course of action was ever to pour cold water on everyone at once.

“My, thank you for the charming invitation. Unfortunately...I will be greatly busy come next spring, and it may prove rather difficult to take time off in the summer.”

The implication of something greater caused the man's gentle brow to arc ever so slightly. Where most would have missed this cue, Agrippina took it as her opportunity to layer on an even more shocking reveal. Those within the Ubiorum county would find out soon enough anyway; she figured leaking this to him was the best way of stirring up the pot.

“His Majesty has given me strict orders to enrich the territory he has granted me. It won't do to forgo a personal tour of the region, now will it? I'm sure that the local lords wouldn't be pleased for an absentee ruler to dole out orders without any personal investment.”

Experienced in backroom dealings, the lady-killer reaffirmed his suspicions: taking her in as a subordinate was a pipe dream. Truth be told, the cleanest, cheapest method of laying claim to the Ubiorum

county was to bring Agrippina into his sphere of influence—the odds of that were looking slimmer than ever.

Setting aside her monstrous and indomitable spirit, her proximity to the Emperor made it difficult to string her along with the prospect of profit. He had a loose read on her lack of passion for loyalty, meaning she had taken her position with full intent to use its privileges; it was obvious to see she was competent enough to do so.

But Agrippina wouldn't be satisfied until she dropped an earth-shattering bomb.

Steeped in the pretext of dance, the pair were the life of the party. Naturally, their eavesdroppers were plentiful. There were no doubt a good number of people utilizing various tricks to duck under the palace's antimagic field and snoop on their conversation; she made her statement as much for them as for the marquis.

"On top of that, I've been entrusted with the honor of being count thaumapalatine. I'm sure an official notice will be sent out soon, but the truth is, a practical demonstration of new aeroship-related technologies is slated to occur in the near future."

"Oh? Are you sure my ears were meant to hear such news?"

"Many of the regular visitors to the palace are already in the know, and the imperial announcement is not so far off. I'm sure His Majesty would be more than happy to share with someone as neighborly as you, Marquis."

In awe at just how sly the fox before him was, Gunther's interest in the young methuselah swelled. He *wanted* her, and that desire showed no signs of simmering down. If only he could make this girl his own, the possibilities for the future would expand beyond the horizons; better yet, she would surely make these political games all the more entertaining.

"We've developed new techniques for surveying land that involve using the vessel's elevation. By making use of mystic waves to accurately measure the distance from ship to ground, this advanced method will allow us to recalculate agricultural acreage to within a razor-thin margin of error, all from the comfort of the aeroship."

"That is...quite the technology. An epiphany of the talented minds of the imperial topographical association, Wit take it. Put into practice, it will surely lead to great gains for the Empire at large."

"You couldn't be more right. The original idea came from the topographers, and I hear a group of capable Daybreak mathematicians turned it into reality. We hope to use the new arrangement to verify the lay of the lands and adjust any errors that might be present in current official records."

This is bad. Though his expression remained static, the marquis was too deeply embedded in the wrongdoings of the Ubiorum county

to remain calm. He was thankful that no one could see the cold sweat dripping down his back.

The protracted absence of any form of oversight save for the occasional imperial minister that could be led astray with a cut of the profits had reduced the territory's revenue to a tragic state of affairs. Having been a key figure in creating this haven for tax evasion and corruption, receiving this bombshell at the worst possible time imaginable made Marquis Donnersmarck want to *scream*.

By the time Agrippina was sworn in in autumn, it had already been too late to fix the numbers: the tax reports she'd received were exactly as fraudulent as the taxes themselves. If she surveyed the land now, the jig would be up.

He couldn't line the pockets of those working on the aeroship; having been the last Emperor's pet project, the whole crew was staffed with unshakable imperial loyalists. And of course, destroying the ship was out of the question. There was no way to prevent her from reassessing the county's arable acreage.

With the count herself involved in the mission, it would be impossible to hide his crimes. He doubted she'd be susceptible to the tricks of psychosorcery that he sometimes used to implant convenient memories in those that vexed him, as well.

As the marquis contemplated the many people who would be backed into corners by this move, the young lady drew herself closer, almost pressing her chest into his own.

Showy beyond words, her smile was so very articulate: *Well? Checkmate is nearly at hand—whatever might be your next move?*

The woman had been suddenly thrust into an impossible task but had turned it around, crafting a trap inescapable for anyone lacking even a single piece of the puzzle. The man's avenues of reversal were limited—so limited that he would need to begin considering less than elegant solutions to his problems.

Knowing that the pawns he would need to sacrifice were many, Marquis Donnersmarck readied himself for battle with an unchanging smile. He, too, believed that checkmate was close.

[Tips] Aerial surveying is a cutting-edge process planned to be tested in the near future. Upon discovering that the aeroship is capable of maintaining a fixed altitude and position, imperial topographers surmised that it could be an effective way of making maps or measuring acreage, and immediately put in a request with their contacts at the College. By using magic to accurately measure distance and geometry to rearrange those numbers, they have effectively created a mystic variant of laser surveying.

After preparing the carriage, I went to pick up my employer, whom I found waiting for me alone. A more rabid socialite standing at the center of gossip might have made her triumphant return with a man or two in tow, but it seemed the audhumbla gentleman had unfortunately not been up to snuff.

That said, I was happy for him, personally. I didn't want to see the promising future generations that would lead our country sucked into the petals of this carnivorous plant. If any of them dared lay a finger on this woman, the enticing hope of nectar would give way to a hell handmade to suck them dry. Her rise as a noble in her own right meant she would probably need to find a spouse before long, but it was going to be a spectacle to see which poor bastard got slam-dunked into the ring of misfortune.

I'd be free from this mess by then, though. That meant I would be able to enjoy the show safely from a seat in the audience.

But tonight, I played my role without a fuss and saw to the madam's postbanquet arrangements once we reached the atelier. She caught me off guard by giving me a tip—a consolation for making me wait so long, she said—suggesting that tonight's ball had been a troublesome ordeal. Curious, I asked what had happened, but was met with an answer that made me want to furrow my brow.

"Marquis Donnersmarck came by to disturb me tonight. It seems he *still* has yet to fold his hand, so I flaunted a rather distressing secret to see if he wanted to continue this farce. With how numerous his conspirators seem to be, I'm sure it'll come with the added value of drawing out reactions from them too."

Sure enough, the name of interest came up. I told her about what had happened in the servants' room, and she rolled her eyes, undoing her hair with a snap. Then, she began listing off unfamiliar family names, bending a finger for each one.

"What exactly are these evidently prestigious names meant to be?" I asked.

"These are the lords of the Ubiorum county who I'll eventually have relocated to more scenic positions."

Wowzers, I almost said aloud, breaking every rule in the servant's handbook. A "more scenic position" was a euphemism for the gallows; reworded, it was an assertion that "hanged, your neck makes for a picturesque scene."

While I understood why my master was planning out a massacre—collective punishment wasn't on the table, but many would certainly die, especially seeing as nobles didn't fare well in vocational changes—I was totally fed up with the sheer volume of her enemies. They weren't harmless twigs on the forest floor; they were wielders of

power who kept detectives and assassins in their back pockets. Just thinking about what was to come made me depressed.

Even now, I hardly wanted for unsavory visitors trying to meddle in my affairs; rather, what I wanted *was* for them to all go away. We were due for an uptick in desperate rebels whose only alternative was execution or jumpy magistrates whose hopeless situations pushed them to rash action.

“Honestly, the circumstances of a new noble unaligned with a strong political faction are so tiresome. My only company are fools misjudging my worth and those trying to exploit my position—even *I* find this exhausting. And all this is doubly true as a count of the palace.”

Lady Agrippina’s lackadaisical complaints ran on as she dropped her coat on the floor, kicked off her shoes after they untied themselves, and loosened up her dress. After degrading her fabulous party wear to a disheveled mess, she fell onto the sofa, pulled out her beloved pipe, and curled her lips into a wicked grin.

“But fair is fair. I shall use the cards I’ve been dealt to the fullest degree. The authority that comes with the credentials of a Great Pillar and the Emperor is no affectation. Not only have I wrung out plenty of funding, but I even managed to expedite a new technology slated for next year to be completed now.”

Man, did she look evil. I hadn’t seen her this devilish since the day she’d recognized Elisa as a changeling and invited us to join her. That smile was enough to bring a child to tears.

“Mmkay,” she hummed. “Run along and prepare my bath—ah, and I’m feeling like rose petals today. As for the scented oils...well, I shall leave it to you.”

“As you will, my liege.”

“Oh, and feel free to complete this any time before you leave tonight, but I’d like you to pen letters to all the names on this list. You’re aware of the reason I’m leaving this to you, I’m sure?”

“As an insurance policy to plausibly deny any official commitments on your part—yes, I’m very much aware. You know I haven’t written any concrete names *and* that I take express care to diverge from your usual handwriting, yes?”

The madam simply puffed a cloud of smoke my way, and I lost any will to argue. Look, if this monster was going to make an effort, then things would probably work out. A lowly kid like me had no business worrying about whatever the hell she had in store.

[Tips] Ghostwritten letters are the product of busy masters entrusting the task of correspondence to their hired help. However, they come with the added benefit of being able to

deflect any demands that the statements within be honored by the simple question, “Do you have any proof that I wrote this?” making them a useful tool in wrongdoing.

More official letters will include both a note apologizing for not penning the words personally and a seal to authenticate the contents within. However, even then, the writer will take great care to omit any evidence that might be able to prove the letter’s origins.

Late Winter of the Fourteenth Year

Road Events

Random happenings may stop a party on their way from one place to another in order to prevent movement from becoming a boring scene change. The introduction of uncertainty may manifest in a peaceful journey, a bandit attack, or even the fortunate discovery of treasure. While many systems provide their own list of possibilities, these are oftentimes derided as “boards of doom” for how intense the outcomes of each encounter can be.

Organizing the contents of the letters she’d sent and the replies she’d received in her mind, Agrippina made her final judgment: the last of the candidates for the purge had been selected.

After sending out a great deal of notices to the residents of her county that she intended to inspect the premises come spring, she’d gotten quite a few different reactions. Some were plainly disgruntled, others asked for her to reschedule to give them time to prepare—whatever might they need to prepare, she would have liked to ask—and others still welcomed her cordially.

With everyone gathered in the capital for the social season, some had even gone out of their way to inquire at Agrippina’s Berylin residence. However, she had yet to so much as set foot in the mansion, since she did all of her work from the palace and her atelier; they invariably went home with nothing but discouragement to show for their efforts.

Agrippina, you see, refused *every* private meeting. Knowing that their objective—namely, bribing her—would be impossible in public spaces, she left them to squirm and fret as they waited for the day of reckoning. Her torturous message was as clear as it was wordless: *I will not accept foul play.*

Her little golden servant wasn’t around; he was busy frantically running around and making last-minute preparations for their tour of the territory. But if one were to get ahold of him, he would have likened the situation to an endless rerun of the last day of summer wherein none of his homework was completed.

At any rate, the conclusion was that a few dozen people were sure to be hanged in the coming weeks and months.

Those who fudged the numbers on their taxes, buttered up

government officials, or treated a handful of cantons as their own personal property weren't all that bad. These were wrongdoings that could be found in any region, and crimes this minor were practically a part of the job; nothing would ever get done if one tried to police these.

However, the flagrant avoidance of taxes, brazen sale of classified information, and unofficial toll checkpoints were unforgivable. Worse still, some had engaged in the expressly outlawed business of human trafficking, and had set up illegal mining operations in the area.

Agrippina couldn't overlook these: her image as their ruler would crumble. This matter required austerity, and she was prepared to callously trim off the fat without the slightest pang of guilt.

Nobility were expected to be ever noble, and the imperial code of justice spake thusly: *Let every penalty atone for one hundred sins.*

"But to think," Agrippina mused with a smile. "I'm impressed that earnestness can survive in a place like this."

Taking one letter from the stack of papers, the count looked over the critical intelligence given to her by a man who'd taken a drastic leap of faith to do so. His name was Baron Moritz Jan Pitt Erftstadt. In the depths of the corruption and rot that dominated the Ubiorum county, he was a rare fellow, untainted by its evils.

While Agrippina had received many requests for an audience, his alone had been of a different zeal: he humbly requested a moment of her time so that he might personally report an important matter with evidence in hand.

The Erftstadt barony was just as old as the county itself. Before being ennobled, the original Ubiorum had taken in the first Erftstadt as a vassal, and had implored the Emperor of Creation to honor his faithful subject's service; the two houses had entered the imperial bulwark together.

Although the descendants of Count Ubiorum had fallen to darkness, the virtuous souls of House Erftstadt had held fast to their primordial integrity until this very day. Convinced that the region had life left in it yet, their dutiful service continued, generation after generation.

At long last, the time had come for the baron to call a new master his own. In one hand he held an abundance of hope; in the other he carried the culmination of enduring his peers' unwithering evil for years upon years while conspiring against them in secret. The final dossier he'd submitted had been passed down from his father, and his father before him: the man's grandfather had begun collecting proof of his neighbors' wrongdoings to be delivered "when the good count returns." Each Erftstadt had swallowed their bile to greet the traitorous rats around them with a smile, and their great suffering had

produced evidence to match.

Agrippina had meant to get to this eventually, and now she had a solid few generations' worth of a head start on her work. Loyalty wrought reward: the new count had a task of the highest distinction to assign to her patriotic baron.

The lady of the county was going to inspect her territory this end-of-winter, and the Erftstadt estate would be her lodging—and *this* was what had driven her servant to near expiry.

After all, the bulk of Ubiorum's resident landowners were praying for Agrippina's death. Being the harbinger of ruin that she was, housing her invited untold dangers; nobody wanted that responsibility. The risks certainly wouldn't stop at harmless pranks: these rogues would do anything to keep the messenger of their reckoning away. Lighting the mansion on fire was an expected opener; assassins were practically a welcoming envoy; if anyone was feeling particularly skittish, they might raise an army to surround the barony.

The new lord hid nothing. Her appointment was an overt proclamation: *I shall use you as bait to sweep away more of the rot at once—are you willing to prove your loyalty?*

The baron's answer was unwavering: *Yes, my lord.*

His answer was the epitome of a steadfast vassal's, worthy of praise to the end of time; pleased, Agrippina had set the current plan in stone with a weighty nod.

Her luggage was totally packed, and the blanket of snow covering the capital was thinning every day. Behind-the-scenes negotiations were all done, and what few preparations remained would be finished soon. All that remained was to wait and see how her enemies would react.

"Not that I expect to be surprised," Agrippina scoffed to herself, tossing the letter into an unearthly pocket of space.

Since the dawn of time, those who found themselves on the back foot of machinations beyond their control had only one hope to escape: if the mastermind and their people died, the matter would be solved. *Forever.*

Agrippina may have been the daughter of an important foreign noble, but there were ways to remove her without incident. She simply needed to pass on in a way that would involve no legal hearings, by some means emphatic enough to leave no room for debate. And then, no matter how powerful her family was, they would have no means of uncovering an elaborately concealed truth that took place far from home; even the strongest arcane barriers paled in comparison to the protection provided by time and space.

A stray thought brought Agrippina back to an incident report she'd read many years ago: a tale of assassination so absurd that it had

gone on to spawn a theatrical comedy. While recalling the details called for more effort than she wished to spare, she remembered that the story had chronicled the death of some count whose enemies had lured a *dragon* into his territory to blow him away, estate and all. Young or old, every member of his bloodline had been killed.

As tempting as it was to decry the account as a *deus ex machina* better fit for a tale set in the Age of Gods, the meticulous scheming and believability of the plot had made for a compelling story. Gratifying to watch unfold and utterly unique, the scheme was inherently impossible to litigate, allowing the conspirators to get away with their thrilling revenge story.

That had been the end to a play, of course, but that wasn't to say there weren't ways of reducing everything to ash in her own situation.

"I *do* look forward to seeing what they have in store. I can only hope they stray from the most banal of scripts."

Gently exhaling a puff of smoke, the methuselah decided to sleep. Her kind could live without it, but the soul was ever in need of sustenance when battle drew near.

[Tips] Aristocrats given the right to manage human resources are allowed full discretion over matters of life and death, so long as their decisions are proven to be rational and lawful. Whether such decisions take the form of rope around a neck or poisoned cups offered in exchange for honor is a topic that goes unquestioned.

The snow had gone, but the chill it left on the earth continued to crawl up my legs as we set off from the capital.

"Mm... Is this *really* how people manage?"

"It really is."

There was no lavish carriage to be found, no multiman guard detail. Our journey would be made in the plainest travel wear, and on the backs of Castor and Polydeukes alone.

"This is—how shall I say—horribly uncomfortable. I can't imagine this is good for my skin."

"*You* were the one who told me to prepare travel gear that'd let us pass for commoners."

"I know..."

The woman dribbling complaints like a leaky faucet was who else but Lady Agrippina, but she looked nothing like I'd ever seen before. Her hair was magically dyed—using the official release of the product Mika had gotten a prototype of—a dull shade of brown, and a pair of mystic glasses made her eyes appear a similar hue.

On top of that, her polished blue-blooded fashion was gone,

replaced with hemp travel clothes I'd purchased for cheap from a thrift store. Her rustic top, thick pants, and large mantle had been designed with only sturdiness in mind; each was packed tight with cotton to retain as much warmth as possible. I was wearing the same thing: this was a necessity to keep ourselves safe on the road.

"Are you *sure* there isn't anything better? I can already imagine how sore my inner thighs will be if I ride in these."

"A commoner's skin is hard and tough. I'll have to ask that you make do with the magic you're so talented with—any better than this, and we'll have to change our story."

We weren't role-playing as retired daimyo—although if we had one more, I was ready to be *Kaku-san*—but rather hiding Count Agrippina von Ubiorum's identity to avoid any prickly situations that might arise. Plenty of people benefited from Lady Agrippina drawing breath right now, but just as many would have preferred her a trifle more inert; as bothersome as it was, this was our means of evading assassinations and assaults on our way to the territory.

That, and we had a *lot* of body doubles.

I don't know what kind of sublime mastery she'd displayed in her negotiations, but the madam had managed to squeeze every penny and every last drop of authority she could out of the Emperor; our decoys were the *imperial guard*. Each unit revolved around a jager who specialized in disguises or a hexenkrieger who'd mystically altered their appearance placed inside a carriage. Surrounded by a convoy of knights each, our distractions had left the capital a few days prior.

Frankly, I'd failed to see in what universe we'd need to worry about *Lady Agrippina* being assassinated, but it turned out that this was more a trap to sniff out her enemies than a guarantee of her safety; it clearly wasn't my place to get smart. From what I could surmise, she'd probably leaked fake intel to suspicious actors to see which of them would bite.

Because otherwise, I couldn't see any reason she wouldn't just send a messenger with a location marker for her to warp to, skipping the tedium of travel and the risk of assassination. I felt for the GM, and could see why space-bending magic had been reduced to a lost art. If just anyone could hop around through tears in space like the madam, then something like eighty percent of all problems that might arise in a campaign could be solved before they became issues at all.

Getting back on track, the perpetrator of any attack on our decoys could easily be discerned. The information she'd leaked had assuredly been carefully tailored to make sure she could trace the flow of information back via factors like location and name of inn.

As for us, we were quietly slipping out of the city after all the other teams had left to make sure we didn't have any turncoats closer

to home. According to Lady Agrippina, the list of people who knew of this plan was extremely limited: a select few nobles from the newly formed faction surrounding her, a handful of high-ranking imperial guardsmen in charge of coordinating the decoys, and me and Elisa.

So we should be good! is perhaps what I would have thought if I knew nothing of my own bad luck or my employer's talent for drawing heat. I already knew that all this planning wouldn't mean anything, and *something* was bound to happen—absolutely guaranteed.

Ugh, I hate this. It took a particularly awful set of circumstances to make me wish I were traveling *by myself* instead. This was worse than being at a bar or baseball game alone with my old boss.

"I'm trying to keep my arcane footprint to a minimum," Lady Agrippina grumbled.

"Isn't that a bit much to hope for when your plan includes opening a portal back home to sleep every night so that you can avoid the inns?"

"Please. My arrangements on that front are airtight. I had some Polar Night scholars seal our tent with an order-made barrier. As it turns out, an imperial order and a blank check are motivation enough to make a remarkable product."

"That sure is something... Just how remarkable is it, exactly?"

"If you stood inside and used your entire mystic arsenal without reserve, I wouldn't be able to notice from just outside."

That's pretty fucking remarkable.

That finally gave me some perspective: she'd ordered me to leave the low quarter without her, lead the horses to some lonely woods, and set up the tent here in the middle of nowhere...only for her to scare me silly when she opened it from the inside and appeared.

Oh, and I'd neglected to mention this, but I was also in costume. My public image had become that of the madam's sworn retainer; if I stayed in the capital while Lady Agrippina "left," only to depart on my own at a later date, everything would fall apart. The imperial guard had moaned about how hard it'd been to scrounge up a team of combat-ready mensch with my build and height, but I was willing to chalk that up to the stress talking and move on.

My hair and eyes had been alchemically dyed to match Lady Agrippina's—to the *great* displeasure of the alfar—and I could probably fit in perfectly with my brothers and father now. In the past, I'd been mistaken for an adoptee when my mother wasn't around, seeing as how Elisa and I were the only ones to take after her. Seeing myself like this in the mirror had been a new and refreshing experience.

I bet they'd be surprised to see me like this too.

Alas, Ubiorum county was months away from Konigstuhl on

horseback, so I didn't have any hope of taking a quick detour on the way.

"Hm," the madam mused, "I suppose I'll put up an ultrathin barrier on the inside of my clothes—agh, but that's just a different form of discomfort in and of itself."

"Then perhaps the best solution would be to make the trip as quickly as possible."

"You've grown quite the mouth—do you know that? Well, whatever. Let's be off."

Lady Agrippina nimbly hopped onto Castor without the slightest hint of her usual listlessness. Not wanting to be left behind, I jumped on Polydeukes and followed after her.

"I suppose this marks the beginning of my journey...with this brat of a brother."

"...Indeed it does, Sister Dearest."

Ahh, of course. I'd done my best to keep it out of mind, but however could I forget this vital part of our backstory? The two of us were apprentices in the capital who'd just been given leave to visit home: the older sister Julia and the younger brother Alfred.

Funny, isn't it?

Hide her trademark ears, and the methuselah was easy to take as a mensch; on a purely cosmetic level, maybe calling it easy was *understating* it. But what this pretext failed to account for was that I would have to refer to her as "Sister Dearest" without wincing in pain or choking on my own laughter—a true challenge indeed.

[Tips] The use of body doubles in times of peace is part of imperial aristocratic culture, but the truth remains that not all nobles need them for all outings. For most, their usage depends on circumstance.

The point-to-point distance from the capital of vanity to the Ubiorum county's capital city of Kolnia was roughly four hundred kilometers; it was closer to six hundred and fifty along the linchpin highway. The trip was comparable to the journey from Konigstuhl to Berylin, meaning that we could've finished it in a few hours on a twenty-first-century Japanese bullet train but instead had to settle for a few months on horseback.

Beasts of burden tasked with ferrying along people and their luggage could usually manage twenty to forty kilometers a day—maybe sixty on a really good day. On top of that, they needed to rest every four to six days of walking, so a solid estimate was around two or three hundred kilometers of progress every ten days...if the conditions were right.

Unlike cars, the restrictions on when horses could perform at their potential were plentiful enough to forget about any semblance of steady, regular progress. Their horseshoes could fall off, their hooves could crack, and they could even come down with a stomachache; the troubles of living could manifest themselves in our very alive mode of transportation. Taking care of our steeds' health was just as important to our progress as taking care of our own.

Other than that, poor weather could limit our range of travel on any given day; given that we had to keep track of both our supplies and the distance to the next place to stay, this could mean we'd be stuck in one place for days at a time. Combined, these factors meant a one-way journey took three months to complete.

As an aside, a traveler with a particularly high-held nose, picky about their choice of inn and insistent on a large security detail, would need an extra month or two. Not only would the greater number of people slow the operation down, but hotels that could accommodate a giant party of guards, servants, and their horses were few and far between; such journeys were doomed to even more obnoxious routing issues.

An emergency courier swapping out horses at every stop could make the trip in a month, and a drake rider could shorten that into a handful of *days*, but we had the misfortune of dressing up as normal travelers trying to get by.

Instead, we'd trotted along for the past month without much to note. It had been a peaceful journey thus far. Though the heavens sometimes sprinkled us with snow as if they had suddenly remembered the season or whisked away all sight with fog too thick to see my own nose, these obstructions had been well within our calculations. At our current pace, we'd make it to the Ubiorum territory by our promised date.

We were currently checking into a hotel just before the major city of Braunschweig—a rather foreboding name, I thought—located in the center region of the Empire. The inn's name was The Golden Birdie, and it was the sort of place a regular worker might barely be able to afford. Instead of being protected by a random bouncer, the guard was a real fighter worthy of his title; the stables were nice and secure.

We'd borrowed a room for two, but Lady Agrippina had quickly slipped into the safety of the tent's barrier and retired to comfort. I couldn't really blame her. Mastery of space-bending magic meant that she didn't have to sleep in this dingy—though I found it rather luxurious—room and could relax in her personal laboratory; why wouldn't she go back?

"Man, I'm tired!"

Falling backward into bed, I could feel the stiffness built up over a

long day on the saddle melt off my muscles. For one sweet second, everything felt worth it—this had to be one of the best parts of any journey. Sans getting home, that is: the eventual return was out of the running on account of being locked up in the hall of fame.

The bedding was wonderful: there wasn't any question that it had been cleaned since the last guest had left, and the stuffing smelled fresh enough to assume that the owners regularly changed it out. Few things in this world could command as much gratitude as a bed free of fleas and lice.

One night in this room, along with a meal, bath, and use of the stables, cost one libra and twenty-five assarii. Different people would have different opinions on whether that was a good or bad deal, but personally, I thought it was a low price for what they offered. *Real* scams made me want to grab the innkeep by the collar for being audacious enough to take money for the “services” they provided.

Lady Agrippina went home every night anyway; the only thing that mattered to her was having proof we stayed in *an* inn, wherever it was. As a result, she had no qualms about settling for a mangy establishment if it was the only one around, and gods, did I suffer.

Ticks, fleas, and crab lice were par for the course, not to mention the time a crowd of those unspeakable *vermin* scattered out of sight as soon as I opened the door. That night, I'd realized that camping outside would be much nicer, and had sneaked out in the dead of the night to pitch my own tent. Living in the capital, I'd forgotten that four walls and a roof weren't always better than the great outdoors; I understood that I was the only one who had to deal with the rooms, but would it have killed her to be a *bit* more considerate?

“Shoot, I can't kick back all day.”

As tempting as it was to continue snuggling with the bedsheets, I had to clean up. I took apart the madam's teleportation tent and then stuffed the other bed with some spare cloth to make it seem like someone was sleeping. In the unlikely case that someone came in, I had to make sure our story kept up.

With my forgery done, I decided it was a good time for a bath. The folks running the inn would bring up our supper on their own later, so I wanted to clean off some of the grime of traveling before then. Well, at least, as much as I could in a steam bath without a tub of water.

“Excuse me, ma'am,” I said to the proprietress. “Is the bath ready to use?”

“Oh, of course. But you know, with how slow business was today, I was *this* close to not lighting the fires.”

Happy day! Not many people traveled at this time of year; real traffic only began to spring up once it got a bit warmer. Ready to

large sauna for the few workers who lived here on days without guests was probably a tremendous waste of money, so I really lucked out.

“Will your sister be bathing as well? The facilities flip between being open for men and women every other hour.”

“Uh... She said she was tired and went to bed, so I think she’ll probably pass.”

I flashed an empty smile and walked away from the front desk. As much as I still hated it, I’d grown used to pretending like that *creature* was a sibling. Still, I did *not* appreciate how she’d started having fun with our assumed identities by giving me shit in a manner befitting an older sister, fakeness notwithstanding. Seriously, what was the point of going out of her way to fix my clothes or hair in public, or to wipe my mouth like an actual caretaker? No, wait, I’ll answer that: she was killing time by watching my reactions.

Putting that out of my mind, I headed toward the bath and stripped down in the changing room. Inside, I found a sauna that was much more nicely kept than the price would suggest. The failings of lesser businesses were absent: no slimy floors due to insufficient cleaning, no benches that creaked and snapped at the lightest touch, and no filthy water that made me want to jump in a wild creek instead.

Praise be. In a world where money couldn’t buy honest service, places like these were true godsend. I tossed some water on the red-hot stones on the stove, filling the air with steam. When a white cloud of fog set into the room, I finally felt like I was taking a real bath.

Ahh... This is wonderful. If I had to nitpick, I would’ve liked for it to be a degree or two hotter, but I knew I shouldn’t add more firewood of my own accord, and heating it with magic was out of the question. I’d have to live with it; but hey, the missing heat could always be made up for with a longer stay. After that, the only thing left would be to hit the sack: no caring for the madam meant a nice, leisurely night awaited.

I had spent a while rubbing myself with a birch branch to improve my circulation and scrub out any dirt that came out of my pores when I noticed some other customers arrive at the bath. I heard the door to the room before this one open, and a series of footsteps...

Hm? But there was a distinct lack of rustling clothes. I waited with ears on full alert, and made out that they hadn’t even taken off their shoes in the changing room.

Letting my instincts take the wheel, I crouched down by the entrance with my towel in one hand. I didn’t so much as breathe for the next twenty seconds, totally erasing my presence...until some unmannerly buffoon violently kicked the door open.

Oh, I see. So that’s how you want to play it.

Then I guess I don't have any reason to hold back.

On the other side of the doorway, the most obvious pack of goons I'd met yet awaited. But before they could bring their guard back up from breaking down the door, I swung my towel straight with all my might, landing a hit squarely in an intruder's face.

"Gah?!"

Of course, it wasn't *just* a wet towel: I'd folded it in two to cradle a burning-hot stone, fresh from the stove. Swinging my makeshift blackjack with a reversed grip, I caved in his hooded face with superheated pain. Judging from the crunch, it was clear that I'd broken more than just a nose.

The combination of scalding heat and forceful impact caused him to collapse, and the ink-dyed short sword in his hand went loose. Snatching it out of the air, I bolted into the changing room—to find two more attackers. Fair enough, I supposed; backup was more than expected.

They wore darkened leather armor and gloomy cloaks that covered their entire bodies. Furthermore, their hoods had been enchanted to hide their faces no matter the angle. These weren't your everyday robbers: they were career wetworkers, accustomed to swinging blades in the shadows.

Still, the task of taking out an unarmed, unclothed kid lazing about in the bath must have had them feeling safe, because their reactions were several beats too slow. I understood the shock of seeing their companion's skull rearranged, but this was hardly professional behavior.

"You little—hrgh!"

"What theaugh?!"

With a quick turn of the stolen sword, I sliced at two hands: one holding a dagger, and the other reaching for a strange crossbow I'd never seen before. These sorts were liable to keep fighting so long as they could move, so I forwent mercy and chopped straight through their wrists. Any hand being used to kill an innocent little boy didn't deserve to be attached to a person anyway.

As the two of them gripped at their wounds, I bashed in their heads with the back of my sword; just for good measure, I went over to the guy cradling his face and kicked his head like a soccer ball to add three tallies to my score. Unlike the capital's guards, I could do whatever I wanted to these guys so long as I didn't kill them.

"Huh. That was a letdown."

To be blunt, these guys were chumps. After my run-ins with magia and the imperial guard, I'd been trembling over what a nobleman's assassins might look like. But if this was all they had to offer, then the sauna would be a faster way of working up a sweat. Wasn't this a bit

too easy? I'd prepared all sorts of stuff to counter specialized killers, but it seemed it was all for naught—though I did have to admit I hadn't expected them to jump me in the bath.

"Hm... Yeah, no, I don't recognize any of them."

I tore the hoods off the unconscious men—I made sure to stop their bleeding since it would be a pain to have them die on me—and, as expected, recognized none of them. The dagger-wielder was a werewolf, the backup crossbowman was a mensch, and the first guy...was too mangled to figure out, so I gave up.

Thankfully, it didn't matter whether I knew them or not. All I had to do was tie them up, and Lady Agrippina would take a little peek into their heads for the rest. The only ways to hide something from her would be to use the same Sympathetic Barriers I and other magia used, or to have unbelievable levels of grit; neither seemed likely.

"...Wait, shit!"

After tying the three of them up, I realized I'd missed something critical: *I* knew that the madam wasn't in our room, but *they* didn't. And if they weren't afraid to kill anyone they came across...

I threw on my pants and shoved both feet into my boots without so much as putting on my socks first, then bolted out into the cold. Sprinting back to the main lodge, I realized that my fears had been well-founded.

I had been too late.

"You rotten bastards!"

Inside, the innkeeper and her guard were dead. The proprietress's body was at the front desk, her face buried in the hotel ledger with blood running down to the floor; her neck must have been cut from behind. On the other hand, the guard had fallen out of the chair by the entrance. His hand was still holding his sword, despite the crossbow bolt buried in his neck. He'd probably risen as soon as the owner was attacked, and had gotten shot for his troubles.

Rage threatened to reduce my vision to a boiling sea of reds and blacks, but I forced it down and ran for our room. As much as I wanted to go over and close the victims' eyes, the clock was ticking.

On the way there, I passed two wide-open doors. Quiet and lifeless, it seemed those rooms had contained guests who'd met similar fates to the innkeeper. In fact, I suspected the same had happened on the third floor, where the husband of the operation was sure to be resting.

I turned the corner into our hall—*There they are!*

A group of four shadowy figures dressed exactly like the ones at the bath was huddled around our room. One was fiddling with the lock, so it seemed like I'd caught them just as they were preparing to strike.

You're not getting away with this. Sure, the room was empty, but I could search every corner of my heart and I wouldn't find it in me to let them go for what they'd done.

"Huh?! Who are you?!"

One of them noticed me, but I didn't care; I just hurled the short sword I'd stolen. My Hybrid Sword Arts training included impromptu throwing, and the blade sank into the frontmost enemy as if guided to him by a magnetic pull. Nice and full of oxygen, the resulting geyser of blood was a pure scarlet, sputtering far to coat the well-kept floors in its filth.

Apparently, my attempt to contain the fury in my heart had failed. My aim was slightly off, and the sword had landed right between his head and shoulders, all but decapitating him as it cleaved deep into the trunk of his neck.

Shit—that guy's dead. I cursed myself for letting him off with a quick death; what was I going to do if he was the one in charge?

But for now, I needed to pull myself together and deal with the remaining threats. These assassins were a cut above ordinary bandits, moving to intercept without delay: no expletives, no surprise, and no care for their fallen friend.

One came at me with a one-handed sword, well suited in length for indoor combat; another carried a smaller dagger made for stabbing. Behind them both, the last maintained his position by the door, pulling out a wand.

You have a mage?! How fucking nice!

Although Hybrid Sword Arts did highlight the ability to fight unarmed, trying to tackle this situation without a weapon was going to be rough. I could tell from their postures and gaits that these were experienced fighters: whatever style of combat they employed, I was convinced they were at least VII: Virtuoso in their mastery. A hotel hallway was practically no distance at all against a savvy opponent. I needed my next weapon, and fast.

So I called for it—the horrific blade who crawled to my bedside every night to sing her twisted songs of love.

"—!"

Crying out in an ecstasy that brought reality itself to the brink of shattering, her wordless delirium was the backdrop to a swift uppercut. In one stroke, an arm was severed, leaving a trail of misty blood in its wake—naturally, it wasn't mine.

"Graaah?!"

I'd aimed for the slim opening in the vanguard's armor to cut straight through his right elbow; not even the hardened killer could stay silent after that. He cradled his wound and stumbled head over heels. I bet he couldn't believe it: I was some half-naked brat who'd

foolishly thrown away his only weapon, so why was there a sword in my hands?

The ear-shattering joyful yelps sounding in my mind were of gratitude, for the Craving Blade knew no greater happiness than for a swordsman to need her as a sword.

But the weapon was too heavy to be swung from below—and more importantly, it was too *long*. The unwieldy zweihander required both hands, and should have been impossible to use properly in a cramped corridor.

“Good girl.”

Her pitch-black blade was as dark as ever, and the illegible ancient writing carved into its sides was no less ominous; yet as the last vestiges of daylight beamed through the window and reflected back as an obsidian glow, the image produced was clearly of a sword that was shorter than before.

More precisely, about the same size as Schutzwolfe.

Let me clarify that this wasn’t a sudden idea I’d come up with on the spot. I’d taken the Craving Blade out for a bit of practice one day—but also because her nagging at night became particularly insufferable if I neglected her—only for her inarticulate screaming to take the vague form of a meditation on love.

If love could only be earned with love, she conveyed, then she’d failed me. But she wanted mine; then it was only right that she demonstrated her passion.

Before I knew it, this accursed blade of mine had learned to fit any form I desired. By failing me, I assumed she was referring to my mortal combat against the masked nobleman. Her claim was that, had I wielded the weapon best suited for me, every cut could have been deeper, closer to being lethal. But none had done the job, and I’d nearly died because of it.

So the sword, in the depths of its adoration, had decided that songs were not enough; actions were needed to prove her devotion. Ever since, she had begun to morph in both length and width.

Nowadays, she could become anything I desired, so long as the final form could be considered a “sword.” Anything from a short sword barely bigger than a dagger to her original, nigh unusable heft was fair game. I’d thought her like a woman changing her wardrobe to suit a new lover’s palate, but who was I to deny that that was indeed an expression of love? Wanting to draw every last drop of attention from your chosen soulmate is a natural wish.

Besides, men were prone to styling up in clean suits and reaching deep into wallets to do the same. Having someone willing to dedicate everything to me in the name of love was a good feeling, and that was no different even coming from a blighted sword that chipped away at

my sanity.

The second ruffian pushed past his fallen comrade to thrust his dagger forward, but he was too late. I ducked under his attack, slicing at the back of his knee to capitalize on his overextended leg; hard tactile feedback told me I'd cut through muscles and tendons to reach bone. All his weight had been resting on this leg, and he went flying forward as soon as I rendered it useless.

Letting all that momentum dissipate on impact with the ground would be wasteful of me; I extended my foot ever so slightly to catch his face. Despite not putting any force into it, I could feel the shock of a gnarly collision. My boots had metal plates on the bottoms and tops to prevent damage from traps and stomping, equipping my kicks with a real blunt weapon.

Ouch, that's a bad angle. He'd lost an eye at best, and might have had his socket pulverized at worst. He wouldn't be getting up any time soon.

"Cotton embrace—pinch of lily—a stem of rose, freed from thorn..."

But I didn't have any time to spare. The mage in the back had his wand in one hand, a catalyst in the other, and was even chanting an incantation. Though he didn't seem like a magus, those three supplements combined would surely bend reality in unthinkable ways.

So I just need to stop him before it goes off!

I leapt with all my force, closing the distance in a single breath. While I hadn't touched my Agility in a long time, it was more than enough to cover distances this short.

"...lead these souls to a gentle graaagh?!"

And an attack made with a sword that could grow *midswing* was sure to reach. The Craving Blade reclaimed her original form, the tip of her edge cutting through the hood and across the mage's mouth before he could give his spell any more verbal structure. The tiny white fragments riding the wave of blood were the last hurrah of his teeth, and the small chunk of flesh belonged to his tongue.

Only half-constructed, the spell had lost both its caster's attention and the support of incantation in one fell swoop; it exploded. I jumped away on reaction, only to see a cloud of white smoke envelop the assassin.

I'd covered my face and made sure not to breathe it in, just to be safe. The incantation sounded like it was borrowing a line from a lullaby, so it seemed plausible that he'd been trying to cast a sleepfog—a terrifying spell that put enemies to sleep if they failed a resistance check. It was so broken that GMs concerned with game balance tended to treat it like a lost art, but my old tablemates had been the sorts to use anything in the toolbox; I had experience on both ends of its effects.

These guys sure used some awful tricks. If I dozed off, all my training would cease to matter. The story would be different if I had someone to watch my back, but I would be doomed by myself. Hadn't anyone told them that it was bad manners to use crowd control on a hero without a party?

Admittedly, there was a chance that my Sympathetic Barrier would have blocked its effects, since it was a spell that affected my state of consciousness. Either way, I was still happy to prevent it from going off at all.

Thinking about it, this was probably how they'd managed to clean out the building without causing a scene. I wasn't exactly the most sensitive listener ever, but not even I would have idly lounged in the sauna had I heard screams coming from the main building.

Dammit. I might've been able to save some of them if I had sharper ears...

But my frustrations and regrets would have to wait; there could still be more assailants lurking around. For now, I would need to apprehend these rogues and lug up the three I'd left in the changing room. Once Lady Agrippina was done pulling intel out of them, we could turn these crooks in to the local magistrate—their deaths wouldn't come easily.

After finishing the knot binding the assassins together, I figured I should head back into our room. I'd left my Voice Transfer transmitter in my luggage, and wanted to put some clothes back on.

But just as I got up, something came flying through the hallway's window without a sound.

I didn't spend a single moment trying to process what the round object was before I tossed it right back out with an Unseen Hand. Immediately after, I shouldered my way into our room, hitting the floor with my hands on my ears and my mouth open.

A few seconds later, an explosion shook me so violently that I could feel my brain shake despite covering my ears. I didn't know whether it was chemical or magical, but that thing had been a bomb. *Isn't that a bit extreme?!*

As it turned out, my hunch that I hadn't finished off the last of them had been right—and whoever was left was skilled enough to evade my Presence Detection to boot.

“Argh, you bastards! Give me a break!”

I couldn't tell if the grenade was supposed to kill me or silence the failures for dropping the ball, but if they wanted a fight, I was happy to give them one. This was already a train wreck; what was another twenty or thirty goons? In fact, I'd just been thinking that all the poor innocent folks they'd killed might need some company to lead them back to the gods' laps!

Pulling my cloak off the wall with a Hand, I slid into it and ran back out into the hall, summoning another invisible appendage to toss the goons into our room. With one foot on the windowsill, I looked around and saw nothing... *So they're above!*

"Lottie, boost me!"

"Wha?! Um, 'kay!"

I twirled into the air and called the name of an elf sure to be loitering around somewhere or another. Despite her surprise at the sudden request, she managed to pull it off spectacularly.

Charlotte the sylphid could heed my call wherever the wind blew, and she summoned a gale as powerful as it was gentle to lift me onto the roof. A natural gust strong enough to carry a person would have come with an entire tornado behind it, but her physics-bending fey whirlwind carried me softly upward.

Perhaps that was why I managed to react to the dagger zooming my way.

As soon as I got up, I had to jump to the side to avoid the projectile precisely placed to send me falling back down. It had been a twitch reaction based solely on the dilute, yet palpable bloodlust tickling my senses. A flurry of shingles scattered as I broke my fall and instantly bounced myself to my left with an Unseen Hand—no sooner had I evaded the first round than another callous clump of steel barreled my way.

The follow-up attack split the air as it rained down on me: a rod-shaped dagger specially made for throwing. Had I let myself get comfortable after dodging the first, I would have paid the price now. While a weapon this small wouldn't have spelled death, I would've sustained a serious injury.

My opponent was a genuine threat. Their presence and intent were so thin that I could hardly get a read on them; they were leagues above the oafs I'd mopped up downstairs.

Noticing that they were trying to sweep my landing, I held the Craving Blade close to my frame to block the hit, using the force of impact to buy myself some space. The attack had been so powerful that trying to stand my ground would've been suicide: while my sword could take the abuse, my body was better off rolling away the momentum over two or three somersaults.

Come to think of it, getting to take a movement action on a successful reaction made me a really annoying enemy to fight, huh?

Quips aside, I used the excess energy to regain my footing. Turning with the Craving Blade at the ready, I finally got my first good look at who I was fighting, and man, were they hard to describe at a glance.

The profile of their upper body was obscured by a hooded cloak,

but the long trunk extending from below was anything but mensch-like. The army of thin legs propping them up pointed to a demihuman—probably either a millipede or centipede.

As the careening sun said its final goodbyes and the divine Father reclaimed His gift of sight, it became nearly impossible to make out even the broad strokes. What little sunset remained only served to cast a backlit shadow, and the only thing I could confirm was that an endless array of legs was poking through the cloth wrapping around their trunk.

This person was cautious enough to keep even their gender ambiguous, but the massive pole they carried was plainly visible. It was every bit as long as their wriggling trunk, and they twirled it around with great elegance as they sized me up for dodging their initial offensive.

This was...problematic. Their arms were long and flexible, and their weapon of choice was longer than anything a humanfolk could wield on our stubby legs. But most vexing of all...

“Hm?!”

...was their unreadable footwork!

Advancing on an abundant set of skittering appendages, my opponent maneuvered in ways that were far harder to anticipate than a fighter resting their weight on two. Legs were the foundation of movement, and usually, watching them and the chest was enough to get an understanding of how a fighter’s arms would move; together, that would suffice to scope out the angle of entry. But here, I had no idea how they’d approach.

Not only did their unorthodox gait free them from having to commit weight in any direction, but I was stuck floundering at how to best dodge or block, putting me on the back foot. Worse still, they stood up tall, flexing their trunk to extend their already-obnoxious reach into something that enabled wide arcs of attack from above.

The unstable footing of the roof didn’t help either: while they scurried up, down, left, and right with ease, I was struggling to take solid steps on the poorly cemented shingles. Every one of their deft steps felt like a mockery of my efforts.

But perhaps their most damnable trait was the raw power their giant frame provided. This utter monster could probably plow through a squadron of regular soldiers with ease.

Shit! You’re telling me a freak this strong was just waiting here in case the first group fucked up?! Gods, it would’ve been easier if they’d just come at me indoors!

The polearm whipped around at rapid speeds, engraving the air with a series of short arcs; but for as flashy as it seemed, their movements were delicacy incarnate. Drawn by the hefty metal

spinning around, each curve of motion was simultaneously an attack and an invisible barrier barring my entry. As if their elegance in footwork weren't enough, they were now skillfully eliminating any potential opening.

I knew we were opposed, but I couldn't help but be impressed. This was a style of combat that betrayed a keen awareness of their physical boons, and I would've asked to see their character sheet for reference had I come across them over the table.

The precision of their attacks was just marvelous. For us on two legs, the great tragedy of offense was that every step introduced brief moments of instability; freed from such struggles, they carefully selected where to place their strikes, always finding the spot that would cause me the most trouble.

They were a genius, deserving of a more splendid stage than the shadows of assassination.

Since the centrifugal force bolstering their swings could crash straight through a half-assed defense, I opted for evasion as I stepped forward and eyed for an opening. Gripping my blade in reverse with both hands, I redirected a diagonal strike aimed for my shoulder. I'd used the same trick when dealing with the batons and spears wielded by the guards of Berylin; instead of suffering recoil in an attempt to knock the weapon away, it was better to gently guide it off its course. Sir Lambert had distilled years of fighting polearms on the battlefield into our lessons, and that pain was hard to forget.

I could tell this attempt had been particularly successful from the resistance against my hands, and I sensed an expression of surprise flash across my opponent's hidden face. I bet they hardly felt the collision at all.

Now it was my turn to attack. Weapons with reach excelled at controlling space, but they suddenly turned into a weakness if I could get up close. Plus, unlike a lamia, this demihuman's segmented legs couldn't curve in every direction: they didn't have the option of flinging their trunk forward as a whip. And while they could run backward at tremendous speeds, it wouldn't be enough to shake me off.

Considering the skill of those I'd fought, this person was almost definitely in charge. I wasn't going to let the biggest archive of intel get away. But just as I began considering whether a severed thumb would suffice, a terrible omen zipped across my neck.

I raised the Craving Blade on reflex. I heard the sharp clang of metal bouncing off metal...and felt the dull pain of something sinking into my gut. Swallowing back a groan, I made full use of my Lightning Reflexes to observe the first projectile gliding through the air: a throwing knife, painted in ash to obscure its form in the dark of night.

Just like the first short sword I'd stolen, it was a tool of the trade, tailored for hushed kills.

But my opponent had thrown *two*.

By layering the second attack into the shadow of the first, they'd managed to hide its course. I'd seen such feats in manga, but never thought I'd see someone actually pull it off, and while wielding a polearm, to boot. The technique had been facilitated by the *second* set of arms peeking out that had thrown the projectiles while the main pair handled the battlestaff.

Ah, shit. I should've known. Had I given it some thought, I would've realized that they'd begun this encounter with both daggers and a pole swipe. Since the rod was too long to be wielded with one hand, I should've suspected another limb from the very start.

Boy, was I glad I'd grabbed my cloak. Despite its humble appearance, the inside of this mantle was actually lined with Lady Agrippina's own defensive formulae, making it tougher than a two-bit set of armor. I'd been forced to keep my equipment down to the bare minimum for our trip, and this had been her way of making up for my loss in safety.

AC was prone to being ignored or written off with all sorts of poorly explained excuses, but it was vital to survival. Without this, I might've been screwed: from the angle it had hit me at, it could very well have hit my liver for an instant kill.

But just because I'd blocked it didn't mean that this hurtling clump of steel in my gut didn't hurt. So, figuring I'd pay back some of the pain, I turned up the engines and began hacking and slashing at full gear; I should've known from the start that this wasn't a foe I could afford to go easy on.

I needed to do my absolute damndest to kill them, and if they ended up alive after that, then that was a lucky break. Trying to secure anything more would just end badly for me.

The assassin toiled to block with their staff and pulled out more daggers at every turn, but two more attacks just meant two more opportunities to roll for counter actions.

And I, too, had cards hidden up my sleeve.

Trying to put themselves back in optimal range, my opponent desperately pedaled backward, but I stuck fast. Reaching a Hand into the pocket of my cloak, I pulled out the catalyst for my mystic flashbang. I'd hidden a few instances all over; knowing something like this would happen eventually, I wasn't going to go around unprepared!

But I wasn't done: passing the dagger that had hit me to another Unseen Hand, I thrust it forward. I mean, they'd gone out of their way to deliver me a new weapon. Wouldn't it be rude *not* to make use of

it?

The extending Hand was both more precise and more powerful than something soaring through open air. My promptly regifted present returned to its sender by lodging itself deep inside their shoulder. I did unto them as they had done unto me; I wasn't necessarily trying to copy them, but admittedly ended up stealing their moves— *Whoa?! That was close!*

Unbelievably, the assassin used the inertia of being stabbed to tilt over backward and whip their legs at me in a kick—though the term felt strangely inaccurate—akin to a cracking whip.

No, actually, the maneuver had been more of an acrobatic trick, making full use of their physique to open a path toward escape. I hadn't expected that at all.

Not wanting to get slammed with the equivalent of a swinging log, I ducked low and dodged. Their rampant flailing kicked up a minor tornado, ripping out both the shingles and the base roofing they were built on to twist through the air. With power like that, a clean hit could've torn out half my rib cage whole.

The assassin had gone prone so that they could let their lower half go wild, and maintained that posture as they zipped off so quickly that I let out a shocked, "Hwha?!"

This was absurd; we'd been at point-blank range. I'd landed a flashbang that should've totally blinded them! My surprise was so great that it took a few moments for me to rise to my feet; by the time I did, my assailant had skittered off the rooftop and disappeared to the wall below. Despite dashing over to the edge in a hurry, they were nowhere to be found by the time I got there.

"Aw, dammit! Get it together, man! Who the fuck cares if I've never fought someone with a build like that?! I let them get away with way too much!"

"...Wanna chase?" Lottie gingerly landed on my head. "I can have a look-see if you want."

"I don't have the speed to chase them down even if you find them," I sighed, angrily kicking a shingle off the roof. "Shit, I screwed up at the end."

I'd been so confident that I'd gotten their eyes and ears...but how could I forget that insectoid demihumans often had different sensory organs from mensch? The fact that millipedes and centipedes could use touch and smell to get around had completely slipped my mind.

Also, their movements had been so intertwined with their multilegged anatomy. It rekindled long-untouched memories of my childhood companion when she was on the hunt. Though she couldn't keep it up for long, Margit had displayed alacrity that was similarly impossible to catch when she got serious.

Most of our enemies were dead and I'd secured a source of intel, but I had failed to win a decisive victory. At most, this was a draw with losses on both sides; I bet other reinforcements had managed to recover the assassins in the changing room while I was preoccupied here.

Whatever the case, we'd caused too big a scene. The building was completely trashed, and the locals were panicking from the sound of a bomb going off. If I didn't hurry up and get my noble lady on the scene, there was a real chance *I* would be the one getting tied up. Someone checking in on the commotion was sure to find the dead innkeeper and her guard, and the assassins I'd captured would mean little without an authority backing up my claims.

Ugh, gods, why did this have to happen everywhere I went? They'd let us enjoy a leisurely month on the road, so couldn't they have waited two more?

"Oww... This *better* not have broken a rib."

Curling up my cloak, I looked over my wound as I dropped through the giant hole in the ceiling that we'd made during our fight. My stomach stung when I landed; I knew it was far lighter a pain than what the poor innocents here had endured, but it still hurt all the same. Seeing as I could breathe without spasms, it looked like I hadn't broken anything, but I was probably best off bracing myself for a fracture at least.

Ah, crap. I gotta put some clothes on before I call the madam.

The last warmth of my pleasant bath was no longer detectable. If nothing else, I could only hope I wouldn't catch a cold.

[Tips] Personal spats within city limits, cantons, inns, or any other location geared toward daily life can be punished with a minimum ten-libra fine or a half year of community service. If weapons are drawn, the fine jumps to a drachma or more with arrest and imprisonment on the table. Finally, attempted assassination carries the absolute sentence of execution, for both those who carry it out and those who plan it.

In a wood a short ways off from the scene of the attack, a band clad in midnight garb assembled in the trees.

Had anyone been present to witness their deep-navy silhouettes, they surely would have struggled to believe there were only four people in the canopy: each boasted a giant body two to three times the size of a mensch, coiling around branches to gain a most alien purchase. An infinite array of legs found footing where anything on two would struggle to stay upright; the group was composed entirely of sepa.

“How is your injury?”

One of the tree-dwellers removed his hood, exposing a wrinkled face and a head of snow-white hair that told a story of many moons gone by. His composure as a seasoned spy could be seen in how still his lips were as he spoke—but perhaps was better illustrated by the cold, unflinching eyes he fixed on his wounded comrade.

In turn, the agent removed her own hood. Though it was just barely agitated, she took a moment to catch her breath before answering with a similar expression.

“I’m fine. It didn’t hit any vital arteries.”

Burning orange hair, amethyst eyes, and olive skin with the faintest trace of blush; she was the same girl that had called out to Erich in the servants’ room of the palace. A cylindrical throwing knife was wedged deep in her shoulder, but as she reached to pull it out, the old man grabbed her hand to stop her.

“Recklessly tear it out, and you risk damaging important veins and muscles in the area. Leave it until we return to safety.”

“Understood.” The girl nodded, but her poker face wavered: years of disciplined training had sealed her mouth shut, but now it was ajar, her inner jaw visibly chattering in irritation. “And you have my apologies. I even returned *wounded*.”

“Calm yourself,” the old man said. “She who carries the blood of our lord should not allow emotion to command her lips.”

“But Elder,” one of the others responded, “the young lady has never suffered damage in the field before.”

“She’s still young,” the last concurred. “I don’t think we can blame her for feeling frustrated.”

Though they remained hooded, the other two sounded relatively youthful from their tones of voice, and they came to the girl’s aid. They, too, understood the pain of taking one’s first hit outside training. Every mistake in a real fight could lead to death, and yet the girl had let the enemy go while suffering an injury. Returning after failing a mission like this left an indescribably bitter taste on the tongue.

That was all the more true for the clan’s beloved prodigy—for a girl who’d finished mission after mission without once knowing defeat. And of course, though secretive as their ties would remain, falling short of her father’s expectations piled onto the mental burdens weighing her psyche down.

“Hmph,” the elder grunted. “I understand—I understand all too well. But I’m telling you to hold that grief back regardless. Do you think *this* is behavior fit to serve our lord?”

“You’re as harsh as ever, sir.”

“More importantly, what’s our next move? Would you like us to

resume the operation? If the two of us occupy the swordsman, I'm sure we'll be able to take care of the remaining assassins."

The elder thought the suggestion over with folded arms, but shook his head after a brief pause. The swordsman in question had injured their fledgling genius—he was no normal opponent. By now, the sepa surmised, he'd probably dragged the remaining captives to a windowless room to funnel any attack to a single avenue of entry. It was unlikely they'd be able to bring him down, even with all four of them...

At least, not when they weren't fully prepared.

"Our first order of business is to do what we know we can," the old man said. "After that, we'll wait for orders. We need to question those we've captured."

Although he made no indication of singling her out, the girl with the fiery hair nodded and began her descent. She was to interrogate the spies waiting in the forest's shadows, whom they'd secured from the bathhouse's changing room.

"You two cover our tracks and prepare a messenger pigeon. Our foe is no mere child."

"Yes, sir," the young pair answered.

Seeing the others off, the elder followed after the youngest of the bunch and climbed down to the ground. Her twisted expression betrayed her unabated frustration. He patted her on the shoulder, his hand conveying a kindness and sympathy that was absent on his face.

"Your chance at redemption *will* come. Show me your best then."

"...I swear it."

With one last chirp of her mandibles, the girl assumed her usual emotionless demeanor, cogs dropping and shifting in the workings of her mind to bear the work ahead. But still, one thought clouded her mind: *He was the first man other than grandfather to land a clean hit...*

[Tips] Sepa are much lighter than their bodies suggest, allowing them to perch in tree branches with a bit of finesse. Further, their flat trunks allow them to squeeze into crevices, giving them surprising stealth for their massive size.

Here was a room full of the most splendid works of art, fit in every way to be an aristocrat's personal chamber, but something was missing. Save for a single chair, not a single article of furniture was tailored for the comfort of the room's resident.

It was a methuselah's bedroom, you see, and quite a stereotypical one at that. Born free from the need for sleep, many of their kind considered the activity an unnecessary luxury. To more reasonable forms of life, their personal quarters resembled a distorted parody of

human habitation.

But where the common person would struggle to relax, Marquis Donnersmarck sat leisurely in his chair. He was still soothing his soul in the realm of paintings when a pigeon entered through a tiny window; gently raising his arm, he extended his hand for it to perch.

“Welcome back. Is something the matter?”

Strangely enough, he began to speak to the little bird.

“The world shall come to he who waits.”

And even more strangely, the pigeon answered with a low growl of a voice. It had recited a long-standing Rhinian adage praising patience—but also one that spoke to the frightful nature of methuselah. While magecraft had the means to convert a familiar into a telephone, it lacked the ability to replicate the quality of one’s voice; these call signs were imperative to identify the speaker, both from other operators and any bad actors who may have gotten their hands on this means of communication.

“Ah, Nakeisha. Your mark was B-1, as Wit recall. Has something happened?”

“I have two matters to report. First, you have my sincerest apologies, my lord. I have failed you.”

“Oh? A rare statement, coming from you. Tell me what happened.”

The man employed swaths of spies strewn across the lands, but at present, most of them were out on this Ubiorum business. Split into countless squadrons, his people were keeping tabs on every crew of travelers that might be the count’s, even knowing that most of them were simply decoys—and one of them had sounded the alarm.

Nobles were, by their very nature, prone to proceeding along politically motivated paths. They had peers that absolutely required an audience should they be in the area; they had enemies who would endanger their lives if they dared cross their territory. The course of a single trip was often enough to betray the details of one’s identity.

As such, the schemer had spared no effort, investigating every lead in order to find something about his mysterious and powerful foe. Of those he’d marked, the codename Bedeutung-1 referred to a set of promising travelers that were highly likely to be the VIP. The suspicion had arisen from an agent noting that it would be odd for the target to forgo the horses she’d used since rising to professorship, and thus they’d begun pursuing those with similar steeds. On the surface, the brother-and-sister pair looked perfectly normal; the spies stalking them had simply funneled years of experience into a keen intuition that had told them they were on the right track.

“The mark was attacked by a third party of assassins. They slipped past us just as our squadron was changing watch, and...we failed to stop

them.”

“That is certainly a stroke of misfortune. Then what of B-1? Are they safe?”

“Mark B-1-a remained unseen throughout. Mark B-1-b was alive and well—rather, he fought off most of the assassins alone.”

“What news! Then the other report must be...”

“Bedeutung-1-a is our person of interest, with B-1-b being her personal blade. He was fearsome in action.”

Nakeisha and her unit had allowed the hitmen to begin their assault due to a lapse in security while switching guard duties, but their response immediately after had been swift. There had been four enemy lookouts posted to allow the assassination to proceed without interference, but the sepa squadron had instantly incapacitated and captured them. Melting into the dark, they’d waited and watched: no matter what else occurred, they couldn’t let Count Ubiorum face any danger.

However, things took a turn for the unexpected. Unbelievably, the brunette brat managed to plow through the entire attacking party all on his lonesome—with refined swordplay *and* magic, at that.

This created a new problem: at this rate, the count would get her hands on a living font of information. While the sepa weren’t keen on letting them die here, these were undoubtedly killers hired by someone embroiled in the wrongdoings of the county; allowing even the slightest morsel of intel to reach enemy hands was dangerous.

Those who’d been left in the changing room were out of the boy’s reach and had been easy enough to retrieve. Yet the same couldn’t be said of the others, right under his nose.

Figuring the death of a bodyguard was hardly of note, Nakeisha made the call to clean house with an arcane bomb. Much to her surprise, not only did she fail, but the boy intercepted and even wounded her.

“Ah, that must have been an ordeal. Are your injuries severe?”

“Your worry is my greatest shame. My arm will move fine in half a month.”

The spy laid the whole of the situation bare, honestly reporting both her successes and especially her failures; the marquis did not scold or shout, but rather honored her efforts. This was the mark of the faith placed in his retainer. If they were skilled enough to slip past Nakeisha—she wasn’t fully equipped on account of the covert operation, but still—then the entry of these third-party assassins had been inevitable. Perhaps he would’ve lost his temper had she commanded twice the number of troops she did; as things stood, though, she had done as much as he could reasonably have expected of her.

To let fleeting emotions compel him into angry shouting was folly; the surest course of action was to calmly move to the next step in the plan.

“Say, have you had a moment to ‘chat’ with the assassins you apprehended?”

“Yes, sir. They were criminals-for-hire, willing to do anything from killing to snooping for the right price. One coughed up that the request came from an imperial knight by the name of Berckem.”

“Ah, then the culprit must be Viscount Liplar.” Sifting through the immense network of entangled parties, the man instantly named the source of the matter; he didn’t have a single doubt that his agents’ interrogation had produced reliable intel. “How impatient. Wit warned him not to act too hastily too.”

Marquis Donnersmarck was connected to Viscount Liplar: he was the conduit for the viscount’s illegal mining operation, after all. Had it been a simple iron or copper mine, or even a source of gems or stone, no fuss would be made. Alas, the Empire made it explicitly clear that all were duty bound to report the discovery of precious silver.

Silver was second only to gold in its value as liquid currency. Wanting greater control over the stability of the domestic economy and more resources for international trade, the state took matters regarding the sterling metal out of noble hands and into its own. Naturally, the owners of the mines saw a cut of the profits, but it amounted to less than a quarter of what they could expect if they settled the matter on their own terms.

Viscount Liplar had thought this to be a terrible waste. And so, instead of reporting the vein to the crown, he’d turned his silver mines into his own personal treasury.

However, distributing the goods in Rhine would draw the attention of financial commissioners with sharp eyes. To avoid their watchful gaze, the viscount’s business revolved around smithing products out of silver and smuggling them abroad to return absurdly high margins. Although Marquis Donnersmarck remained careful not to leave any trace of his involvement, he was perhaps the silver swindler’s greatest ally: he was the gateway to the outside world.

Having won so much wealth from their exchange, the methuselah found it a touch regrettable that the man would be hanged. When the viscount had come crying to him, pale as a sheet, the marquis had calmed him down by promising to sneak him out of the country should true danger rear its head. Alas, it seemed an unwritten oath hadn’t been enough to quell the fears bubbling in Viscount Liplar’s heart.

But while his illicit gains afforded him skilled assassins, the fool was far out of his depth.

For all the centuries under the marquis's belt, Count Ubiorum was such a remarkable powerhouse that he knew a one-on-one fight between them would end in the magus's outright victory. A handful of killers—and those who could be *bought*, no less—stood no chance. Even with an army hundreds of men strong, he suspected that stunning girl would wipe them away with a merry tune and a casual snap; it wasn't even worth considering.

Ignorance truly was a terrifying thing. What else could possess a man to challenge a burly knight clad head to toe in armor, armed with nothing but a fork? If Viscount Liplar was going to be cowardly, then the caution to know his enemy's true nature would have served him well.

"What an awful situation," the marquis sighed. "Count Ubiorum has drawn quite the powerful card. Now the tables are truly against us; Wit suppose a—hmm, how best to put it... Let us say a *less than elegant path forward* is in order. Shall we have Viscount Liplar perform one last task?"

Lovingly petting the cooing pigeon, the marquis began to plot. He needed to soften the blow of Count Ubiorum's next move, if for no other reason than to prevent uncertainty from stoking another idiot into actions that would obliterate his plans.

But in truth, this game had been unwinnable from the start. It was the equivalent of a bout of ehrengarde with an equally skilled opponent at eight-piece odds. Not even Marquis Donnersmarck could come out on top when his opponent had this great an advantage.

Of course, he'd meticulously set up his ploy so that even if all his pawns in the county were hanged and wrung dry for information, no lasting harm would come his way. But losing over a tenth of both his revenue and information network would sting harshly.

"Perhaps it is time for a wager," he mused. "A job well done, Nakeisha. Wit shall send a replacement unit; remain on the scene until they arrive."

"Are we withdrawing, sir?"

"Indeed. Wit have more important work for you. Rest easy and stand by in your best condition. You and your subordinates may go relax at a hot spring, if you'd like."

After a short silence, the pigeon warbled, "*As you will.*"

Letting the bird go, the marquis picked up a bell and rang it. As he waited for a servant to bring him another pigeon, he sank into his machinations.

Now then, which of these units was closest to the Erftstadt barony?

[Tips] Despite the Trialist Empire's strict enforcement of law, the existence of criminal organizations specializing in murder

and kidnapping is undeniable.

A lone man worked away at a simple, functional office desk. Beginning to gray, the mensch was the living embodiment of robust sincerity. His jaw was defined and blocky, and he'd slicked back his short, ashen hair with a bit of oil. Altogether, Baron Moritz Jan Pitt Erftstadt personified austerity in every way; that was precisely why Agrippina had entrusted him with the responsibility of leading her few loyal retainers, and an ace in the hole to make sure he could.

"Like honeybees chasing their hive," he sighed, scribbling through the towering mountain of papers on his desk. The paperwork flowing in and out of the county was thrice—no, five times the typical amount.

Swaths of corrupt lords and magistrates were groping in the dark, trying to find any lead on the new count's plans before she arrived in the spring. Those whose crimes were relatively light had banded together and made themselves busy trying to justify their wrongdoings as clerical errors of the state, which would be belatedly "corrected" alongside an apology for their "mistake" in exchange for survival.

Meanwhile, the worst of the lot had also banded together, threatening to go on strike if their new lord dared to run around purging them from power. At present, they were in a mad frenzy, writing to any and every noble in the area to garner further support. Their hopes rode on the idea that if they stirred up enough chaos in the opening months of the new Ubiorum's reign, then the Emperor might step in and dismiss her. However, Baron Erftstadt had seen the reality of the situation with his own two eyes, and considered their attempt an exercise in futility.

In all likelihood, His Majesty would gleefully round up the titles of those who abandoned their posts, handing them off to the second and third sons of his most trusted supporters. Though that would set off a few years of turmoil in the region, the drawn-out changing of the guard they were planning for could be cut from a quarter of a century to five-odd years. The Emperor would welcome their strike with open arms.

None of these fools had what it took to look ahead; suckling on nothing but sweet wines did the body no good. Many cursed their forefathers for setting off on the path of treachery, to be sure, but they easily forgot that complicity was yet another marker of guilt. Seeing them squirm with no mind for remorse was comedy gold.

Knowing the virtue tied to the Erftstadt name, the damned masses had come to him hoping that his aid would be enough to deliver them from immediate harm, but he was already sick of their pleas. The baron tied up a bundle of worthless letters, massaged his temples, and

let out a heavy sigh.

This was a farce. Worded at its most glamorous, it was a life-and-death contest on the stage of politics; more aptly, a swarm of small fry was floundering around, desperate to slip free from the net it was in. While he knew that he needed only to persevere until Count Ubiorum could arrive and clean house, the wretchedness on display chipped at his faith in humanity. Soaking in the fate of the once-proud Ubiorum legacy was almost enough to draw tears out of the somber gentleman.

Upon finishing his paperwork, Baron Erftstadt set out to summon a retainer so that he might ask how the welcoming preparations were going. But just as he reached for the bell on his desk, he heard the faint sound of squeaking metal.

Darting his eyes over, he noticed the window had been opened. It seemed like a breeze had caused the hinges to creak, but when had it been opened in the first place? His attendants were all thoroughly trained, and they wouldn't dare leave a lock haphazardly open.

Wait. Wind? Instantly, the baron shot up, reaching for his dagger. But while he'd managed to draw his weapon, it was already too late.

Two dirks pierced through the back of his seat; he narrowly managed to parry the one aiming for his neck, but the other stabbed him clean in the chest. His clothes were a family heirloom, enchanted by his forefathers to be as tough as armor. Alas, it failed to save him: either the assassin's blade was a spell-breaker, or he was just that skilled.

Oriented horizontally to weave past his ribs, the dagger dug deep into the baron's lung. Its walls burst, flooding with blood that backfilled into his mouth. Although he felt little pain, his strength was draining at an unstoppable pace.

He broke away and tried to catch himself on his desk, but failed and collapsed onto the floor. The distance allowed him to get a look at the instrument that had pierced his lung; judging from the amount of blood dripping from it—along with the pain that accompanied every breath—he didn't have long.

The veteran had seen this scene all too many times on the battlefield. One clean hit in the chest, and any normal person was out for good. He had five minutes, tops; most got less than that before the lights went out.

"You—ack! Hrgh! You rat... Who—gah...sent you?!"

Despite his daggered glare, he couldn't make out the details around the assassin, still hidden in the shadows. The silent hit man simply folded his arm, wiping the blood from his weapon with the pit of his elbow.

The baron knew from the killer's cool demeanor that stalling for time would do him no favors. He was a straitlaced military man who'd

survived a pit of corruption and depravity despite his well-known commitment to righteousness. Not a moment went by where he wasn't ready for an attempt on his life, and he kept loyal counterspies in his employ. Recent goings-on had caused him to tighten up security around his room; that this assassin was here, and that no one had come to his aid already, were proof enough that their lives had been taken before his own.

In short, his enemies had overpowered him, plain and simple.

Having sheathed his blade, the assassin drew closer, callously grabbing the baron by the hair and pulling out a few gray strands. He tossed the sample into a small vial produced from his pocket and waited a few seconds for a reaction before downing the contents.

"Ugh!" The killer winced and grabbed his own face. In the next moment, he removed his head coverings to unveil the exact features of one Baron Erftstadt.

"Oh... So that's—hng—what you're after..."

The baron had heard of this. Some inventor at the College had developed a disguise so perfect that it allowed one to assume another's identity. The technology posed such a threat to the order of the Empire that knowledge of its existence was off-limits, let alone its manufacture.

Which meant whomever this lowlife worked for had the connections to procure forbidden goods of the highest degree.

Baron Erftstadt knew that, at this rate, the county was in danger; as much as it pained him to do so, he pulled out his trump card. He never wanted to do this—having his own lord at his beck and call was a tremendous slight on the honest man's dignity. But he feigned clutching his chest in pain for the greater good, reaching into his inner pocket to snap a talisman.

"What did you just do?"

The crack of a thin wooden plate made hardly any noise, but the intruder took note. Being confronted by his own face and voice was a disturbing feeling, but the baron exercised his underused facial muscles to twist his lips into a smirk.

"My liege treats her subjects well."

A dull snap rang out.

The assassin didn't understand. He had come prepared with layer upon layer of arcane protection, and yet, for whatever reason, his head had been plucked off his shoulders without any chance to react. The remnants of his mystic preparation strung his consciousness along, but a head without a body could do little more than look around for the culprit and mouth soundless words upon finding them.

Ah, but he had no need to search: his killer made herself known. She hoisted what was left of him up by the hair, and oh-so-kindly

brought him up to eye level.

“What a peculiar guest you’re entertaining, Baron Erftstadt. I take it this isn’t your twin coming to visit?”

The woman who’d picked him up was a methuselah in common travel wear. Her deep-brown eyes peered at him dubiously from behind a pair of glasses. Realizing that the mission was forfeit, the wetworker pulled out the final trick up his sleeve—though he hadn’t expected to use it, he showed no hesitation when the moment came.

“Eek!”

Crying out in a surprisingly human way, the methuselah tossed the severed head away. Black smoke was billowing from the neck, mouth, and ears; bubbling blood oozed from every pore, melting the structure of the skull.

“Tch. So the brain came with a failsafe.”

In his final moments, the assassin had activated a kill switch to eliminate any chance of an opsec leak. He’d had a mana stone surgically implanted inside his head as an unstoppable last resort, ready to boil his brain and deprive psychosorcerers of the secrets he took to the grave. Since the brain was one of the origins of internal mana, it was nigh impossible for an outside force to jam the activation in time. The device was the ultimate show of loyalty for those whose wills were iron enough to proactively kill themselves to atone for their mistakes.

“What a waste,” the methuselah sighed. “I suppose I shall count my blessings that I managed to save a loyal vassal. Are you... Well, I suppose I can see that you *aren’t* all right, now are you, Baron?”

“You have... Grgh, m-my—my sincerest... Blagh!”

“No need to push yourself. Losing someone as dependable as you would have been a far greater pain in my side. Oh, dear, wait a moment. This is a rather deep wound—and the blade had some sort of hex, as well. I won’t be able to fix this myself. Ah well, I’ll have to take you to the College to see an iatrurge.”

Before donning her travel gear and assuming her current identity, the methuselah had been known as Agrippina; the very same Agrippina who had rewarded Baron Erftstadt’s dutiful report with a protective charm.

It was a simple thing: break it, and the creator would know. The new count had handed it to her loyal vassal with strict orders to let her know if his life was in danger, and with a promise to find some way of sorting him out so long as his head remained intact.

Though the man’s lung had collapsed and his heart was a minute from failing, that was but a hiccup to be solved for the most experienced magia. All she had to do now was keep him alive, and her privileges as count palatine would see to the College accommodating

him with its finest healers. He'd be back to full health in two weeks, if that.

Placing a hand on his chest, Agrippina had just begun her emergency treatment when epiphany struck.

"Say, Baron. How would you like being 'gravely injured' for half a year while enjoying a nice vacation with your family?"

[Tips] There are hushed whispers that speak of an arcane disguise so powerful that it can allow anyone to turn into anyone else—that not only does it change one's appearance and voice, but it can even trick mystic barriers. But any time a magus is questioned on its existence, they laugh the matter off; whether yes or no, they lack the liberty to answer in definite terms.

When the madam came out of nowhere and declared that we were changing course, I nearly spat out my morning porridge.

It was the day after the gruesome attempt on her life, and just when I thought she was done settling matters—with every bit of authority vested in her, mind you—she'd vanished. I'd borrowed a room at a new inn to wait for her, and the first thing she said upon returning already threw me for a loop. Sure, I was well aware she was this sort of person, but I was really starting to get sick of it; the tastes of my past world had come to include being bossed around by gorgeous folks as part of its fetishistic canon, but this monster in human skin was a touch too broken inside to count.

"I thought we were going to visit Baron Erftstadt," I said. "Weren't we going to base our operations at his estate?"

"We *were*, but my plans have changed. Off we go to the Liplar viscounty."

"Uh...huh."

I'd heard of that name. It had shown up over and over on the letters I'd been tasked with, and my impression of the viscount was that he was the spitting image of a sycophant. He inquired about Lady Agrippina's mood at every turn and sent great piles of silver and gems to her estate at the capital, but every time, the madam sent them back twofold.

We'd turned away all his offerings and kept correspondence to the bare minimum high society would let us get away with; he didn't seem all that important from my perspective. The Liplar business was primarily in ironwork and mining, which wasn't much to note. Combined with how relatively low the man's title was, the viscounty seemed much too humble to serve as Count Ubiorum's new destination.

But while we hadn't paid him much mind until now—frankly,

we'd actively pushed him away—heading his way on the morning after an assassination scare *had* to point to something more sinister.

From the madam's perspective, Baron Erftstadt was a gentleman who wouldn't think to betray her in a million years. We certainly weren't changing course to *avoid* the mastermind of last night's plot; thus, the reasonable conclusion was to think she wanted to jump into the lion's jaws of her own accord and split its mouth open from the inside out.

I'd *just* suffered through a bloodbath last night—did she have to insist on inciting more violence? Sure, I'd trained up specifically to fight, but my strength was supposed to help me shine in heroic liberty, not fanatic servitude.

More to the point, who did this witch think I was? I wasn't her personal knight, though you wouldn't know it from how she treated me. While I'll admit that I was the perfect frontline pawn for a magus like her, I was supposed to be a little indentured servant boy. Not that I'd ever pull the "Pwease, I'm just a weak widdle servant!" card, though, since she'd probably just laugh at me.

"Changing our destination is well and good, but what about our itinerary? Castor and Polydeukes are still worked up from yesterday's attack, and I'd like to give them another day to calm down."

"That's fine. We may proceed as we had before. In fact, the Liplar viscounty is on the edge of Ubiorum territory, so we ought to arrive sooner than first anticipated."

If you say so.

I knew all too well that trying to read my boss's intentions was a fool's errand; I didn't have the brains to deal in backroom political games. A fundamental tenet of TRPGs was that specialists were better than generalists: if my build revolved around fights and chores, then I'd leave the bluffing and diplomacy to another PC.

Shutting off my brain and trusting her plans only worked because I was absolutely confident that she wouldn't lose under any circumstances, but that wasn't such a bad thing. It's not like I could get away now, anyway. The clever thing to do was to take the path of least resistance until the current stopped pushing me around.

"Mm, at any rate, I have matters to settle in the capital, so I shall take a day's leave. Feel free to do whatever you'd like."

"I'm the central figure in last night's chaos. I'll be a pariah wherever I go."

"Then why not lend a hand with the innkeepers' funeral? If you're as troubled as you seem, then I won't mind you getting a bit involved."

Man, I can feel my heart shriveling up. Not only was I stuck living out on the road, but I'd brought bloodshed with me.

I wanted to see Elisa, Mika, and Miss Celia again—to share trivial small talk, to play ehrengarde, to eat supper, and to go to the baths. And the urge to see my family and Margit swelled ever greater. *One year, I told myself. One more year. But boy, is this gonna be a long one.*

I wanna go home...

[Tips] When the last member of a common household passes away without any inheritors, the larger community they reside in usually reclaims the property. In these cases, the local magistrate will temporarily administer the affairs until more distant relatives can be contacted; if none exist, then the land is auctioned off to the highest bidder.

Climax

Climax

When all that can be said has been, the only conversations left to be shared rest on the roll of dice.

The Ubiorum county was both a merging point for imperial trade routes and a manufacturing giant in its own right.

“Whoa... This makes the *capital* look rural.”

“Your first mistake was comparing a political city to an industrial one.”

I peered out the window to see an expansive highway; it bore the load of an endless stream of travelers, among them massive caravans a few hundred strong. With the start of spring came the first chance for people to start up their business again.

The sheer scope of the products being ferried in and out of the region spoke volumes to its industrial might, and to the fact that this was one of the few places in the Empire that could rival the capital's population. But unlike the capital, the metropolitan areas of the county sprawled out unabated. Berylin was impressive in its own right, of course, but that was because it packed so many people into a single urban center; there was next to nothing in the land surrounding its walls.

The capital was like Tokyo: every inch of the twenty-three special wards was packed with people maneuvering through a forest of skyscrapers, but one short train ride was enough to reach pastoral lands undeveloped enough to warrant a second look at a map.

While the region lacked any castles to rival the palace's luster—to be fair, castles had gone out of style for nonsymbolic purposes—giant, walled cities with populations in the quintuple digits dotted the highway network. A day in any direction on horseback would guarantee a traveler to come across at least one town with a thousand people.

If I was being frank, this was *way* more city-like to me. I'd once called Osaka home, living only a few stops away from the bustling downtown districts. Something about this atmosphere just felt more glorious to me.

But now that I was seeing it with my own eyes, it was hard to believe the state had just let the entire region simmer as the property

of the crown for half a century. Continuing the analogies, it was akin to the central government of Japan deciding to leave the entirety of Nagoya to its own devices. I couldn't tell which feeling was stronger: amazement that the underlying system was sturdy enough to chug along despite that, or exasperation at the absolute authority of the ruling class.

"Wow, look at all those chimneys," I mumbled. "And they're all puffing smoke! Now *this* is what I imagined the city to be like."

"And that, in fact, is Liplar. It is the heart of the county's metalworking industry, and the birthplace of the Empire's ironworking union. The history of the city is rather rich, and it boasts a population of some twelve thousand, if I recall."

Having reclaimed her lavish robes and her original hair and eye color, Lady Agrippina expanded on my observations. We'd joined up with a force of imperial guardsmen who'd been waiting for us at the last inn, so we were free to rock along in a carriage like a proper noblewoman plus company; the disguises had been retired.

But wow—twelve thousand people in a city that wasn't even the territory's capital was astonishing. With several cities of similar size and abundant mines surrounding them, it was no wonder that people were willing to kill anyone in their path to lay claim to the Ubiorum name.

"As an aside," the madam went on, "the Ubiorum capital of Kolnia is roughly a week away. There, the permanent population hovers around forty thousand, but reaches nearly sixty when factoring in the laborers who commute into the city."

"Sixty thousand? That's incredible—that puts it on par with Berylin."

"Well, that's also exactly why the squabbling was so horrendous when its rulership went up for debate. Even with the greatest might in the nation, the best the Empire could do was to shelve the county as property of the crown."

In essence, the region was too big to get the axe; no pretext could suffice to come down on it with armed force. Still, anyone could see that a house built on rotting foundations needed to be rebuilt. Those in the neighborhood were sure to be less than pleased to live by a disaster waiting to happen. Maybe the Empire had been biding its time, waiting for the vacant house to decay to such a state where none could object to its reconstruction. Or, possibly, that had only been one of many plans, and they would have gone with something else had Lady Agrippina not conveniently been around.

Whatever the case, the madam's new reign would probably settle the matter in the most peaceful way possible under the circumstances; perhaps a round of thanks were in order. If nothing else, this was a

much better outcome than burning a dilapidated manor to ashes after the whole world had lost hope for its revival.

“Is Viscount Liplar’s estate close?”

“We ought to be nearly there. The viscount’s administrative office is within the city proper, but his personal residence should be in a more secluded—”

A knock on the carriage door cut the madam off. I glanced over at her, and she nodded me along. Pulling down the window opposite to the one I’d been staring out of, I was greeted by one of the jagers—though he wasn’t in official regalia on account of being lent to us—who’d been accompanying us as Lady Agrippina’s bodyguards.

“Viscount Liplar has sent a troupe of knights to receive us.”

“Is that so? Very well.”

“They wish to salute you. Shall we let them through?”

“Yes, by all means.”

The jager gave the order, and our coachman stopped the vehicle. My master and I stepped out to wait for a few minutes, until a young man leading a horse came along, helmet in hand, with quite a few other unmounted cavalry in tow.

“Jurgen von Huthkass, imperial knight under Viscount Liplar, at your service. I have come to lead the good count to the estate!”

“Well met,” Lady Agrippina replied. “And the others?”

“Ma’am,” he said with a salute. “We have prepared a company of forty knights, led by Sir Solle, to escort you safely to the manor.”

The spokesman was a young and manly mensch. His looks were liable to sit well with ladies—he had no doubt been chosen for the mission precisely to that end. Even if success was unlikely, it seemed the viscount hadn’t given up on carefully selecting his men for a Hail Mary play.

But honestly, what could he possibly do at this point? We’d already officially entered the city, we had a unit of veteran imperial guards with us at all times, and we could summon dozens more of these inhuman supersoldiers with a single call. Personally, I couldn’t think of a single means of dealing with the manpower we’d assembled. What kind of tricks did the viscount have up his sleeve?

“I see,” Lady Agrippina said. “And I take it the process of handing off security has gone smoothly?”

“All is as you have intended.”

Huh? Wait, what? What’d she just say?

“Von Bohl,” she said to the jager, “thank you very kindly for your service.”

“Of course, Count. But if I may mention: should you give the word, we would be happy to accompany you until the end of your journey.”

“I’m *Count Ubiorum*, you know. How could a count possibly refuse the service of her subject’s knights in her own county? No, you are free to go. And do tell His Imperial Majesty that the count sends her thanks.”

“As you will, von Ubiorum. It was an honor to have served you.”

The imperial guardsmen saluted in unison, and then promptly began giving up their spots in our formation to the new knights. Hoisting a flag bearing the Ubiorum emblem with the Liplar banner flown beneath, they made their allegiance to the county known as they knelt to their new lord.

“It is with great honor that I welcome your arrival, Count Ubiorum! On our lives, we swear to deliver you safely to the Liplar estate!”

“And a pleasing welcome it is. I look forward to your continued service. Now then, lead us to the viscount without delay.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Wait. No, no, no, wait. What? Is this part of the plan? Why are we letting the jagers go? Hey, no, hold on—they were the whole reason I could relax and enjoy the sights! Come back!

Though I would’ve loved to grab the madam by the collar and violently shake her down for answers, that was obviously insubordination. The best I could do was to glare at her after the carriage doors were closed; this, too, was a breach of conduct, but I felt like I had the right to scowl.

Okay, sure, I understood on the surface. We’d borrowed troops from the Emperor on the pretext that summoning local knights to the capital would have pushed our arrival back by a year; therefore, when we finally reached Ubiorum territory, it made sense to entrust our safety to the madam’s subjects to uphold their societal image.

But this was enemy territory in all but name. I mean, who was responsible for choosing these knights? I’d known that something was off since our original host, Baron Erftstadt, had come down with a “sudden illness” that rerouted us to the Liplar viscounty, but now I was totally lost.

I whispered low into a Voice Transfer to avoid being listened in on and questioned Lady Agrippina.

“What in the world are you plotting?”

“A secret. Worry not, this is all according to plan.”

Gods, she’s shady.

As showy and nefarious as ever, her grin threatened to snap my heart in two. Oh, gods, how I wanted to heal the cracks in my soul with a ray of pure innocence. I missed Elisa’s beaming, angelic smile so much that I was worried I might die on the spot.

Holding back a groan—I couldn’t show these knights any

disgraceful conduct—I cast my gaze outward to distract myself. After a little while of staring outside, the scenery changed as we entered Liplar proper.

This titan of metallurgy was encircled by three layers of city walls. The outermost ring that we'd just passed was only about three meters high and wasn't very thick; it was less a military fortification and more a deterrent to criminals trying to enter and exit as they pleased.

Off in the distance, I could see the second set of walls rise to around five meters with considerably more girth. Those were apparently a vestige of the period of warring city-states that outlined the historic city limits. In the modern day, they served to protect important factories, companies, and government buildings.

Lastly, a fortified mansion sat within, protected by another set of similarly sized walls. That was supposedly the lord's official station, but our business today was at the viscount's personal estate, located between the first and second walls.

It made sense to me: the truly wealthy could always be found away from the hustle and bustle of the inner city, even if the locale wasn't as convenient for everyday life.

In Earth terms, it didn't matter how far the closest train station was if you could just pay a chauffeur to drive you. I'd been to those sorts of places on business in the past, and the affluence on display had been palpable: not in the rent, but in the services and mediums of transport available. When the only grocery store in town was by the station and every restaurant was a bougie café with a wait-list, an empty stomach could only be remedied by a thirty-minute walk or enough money to call the chefs to you.

This was probably the same logic that had put the lord of the viscounty in such an out-of-the-way spot. It wasn't as if a blue-born noble was going to care about proximity to twenty-four hour food to fuel his midnight snack addiction.

"Wow," I whispered. "How many crimes do you have to commit to build a mansion like that?"

"A hidden mine or two would be plenty—but it seems our friend here has a little more than that."

For as long as I could remember, I always jokingly wondered what kind of body count could buy the extravagant houses I came across. Never had I imagined that I'd end up getting a serious reply.

Hidden mines, huh? I guess that's all it takes to live in luxury.

The personal home we had arrived at was so grand that its existence alone was testament to its owner's sins. The main manor was a four-story building flanked on the east and west by U-shaped wings. Hard coats of plaster left the walls stark white, and incredibly, the roof was a stunning blue. Nothing on display could be called standard

by imperial measures; if anything, it looked like a feat of Southern architecture one might expect by the sea.

Plaster was seen in small quantities on the insides of buildings, but gathering enough to coat the whole exterior—not to mention the craftsmen needed to apply it neatly—must have cost gods know how much. Those blue shingles could only be made by specially trained craftsmen using particular furnaces, meaning each must have cost several dozens of times more than standard roof tiles too.

All I was saying was that, *boy* did he lay it all on thick.

Furthermore, the front yard had its own charms vying for the viewer's attention. A gigantic fountain sat in the center—and if I wasn't seeing things, the gaudy statue sprouting from the middle was made of *gold*—with hedges spreading out into beautiful geometric patterns from that central point. Just imagining the cost of upkeep on the greenery made my head spin.

But as if that wasn't enough, it seemed like the plants had been mystically altered: though the chilly air of early spring nipped at my skin, even the most infamously seasonal flowers continued to bloom. Adding to the list were a hedge maze hidden in the back and an orangery built purely from tiled glass; just how many cantons would one need to sell wholesale to match the price of this single estate?

It turned out that money really did talk, and dirty money had the loudest voice. Yet at first glance, it still appeared to be regal and classy—much to my chagrin.

Surrounded by knights, we passed through the gates and finally arrived at the estate's driveway.

“Lady Agrippina von Ubiorum, Count of Ubiorum, has arrived!”

One of the knights opened the door with a pompous declaration and lent the madam his hand to descend from the carriage. I followed suit, but let it be known that my poker face would have crumbled had I been any weaker of will.

“Ah, Count Ubiorum! I have spent many a weary day awaiting the moment I might have the honor of laying eyes upon you!”

Viscount Liplar had gone out of his way to greet us by the front door, but no one had told me he was an orc—and one whose bulging frame was two sizes larger than the blue-collar workers I often saw in the capital, at that. The good fellows I ran into at street stalls were all plump enough that a mensch of their size would be diagnosed with some kind of disease, but they were better described as bulky or stout than fat. The viscount, on the other hand...was flat-out obese.

The roundness of his figure threatened to tear his magnificent blue doublet and white tights with every movement; his piggish face had so much extra meat that he was a caricature of the “evil aristocrat” trope. I know I'd come from a culture where orcs tended to be

portrayed as villains, but I don't think my biases were at play here: ask anyone in the Empire, and they would peg this man as an evildoer.

Ah, no, but wait! Would anyone let someone this blatantly corrupt be a real bad actor in this day and age? Looking back, my old tablemates and I had once spent so long snooping around a stinking old priest who reeked of villainy that we'd let the true mastermind slip away—the guy had just been an honest worker with a fondness for bookkeeping.

Maybe there was a higher-level game being played: had he tailored his appearance this way on purpose in order to lull his enemies into underestimating him? After being sold short in battle for my stature time and time again, I knew better than to judge a book by its cover.

"Thank you for the warm welcome, Viscount Liplar," Lady Agrippina said.

"No, no, of course! To tell the truth, I should have been the one to staff your escort over the entire journey! That you have forgiven my failure of hospitality and traveled all this way to visit of your own volition is the greatest honor I could ever wish for! I'm sure you're exhausted from the long trek—please, take the time to ease your weary legs, and I shall offer you the best accommodations I can muster!"

Oh. No, I'd been wrong. His bootlicker energy was coming through in spades. If this was an act, then he was too skilled an actor for me to see through his front.

Was this what life in a lordless region did to a person? Imperial lands were sort of an insular bubble, and that cultural dissonance may explain why he seemed categorically different from the dignified nobles I'd met in Berylin. If they were the C-suite executives of major conglomerates, then this guy was the president and founder of a small construction company.

"I have heard that misfortune befell you on the road here, and that you tragically lost some of your men. I turn in bed every night, wishing that I had been there to help..."

"There's no need to worry. My most capable retainer is still with me."

"What wonderful news! Then would you like to give your servant a moment to rest as well? I can provide as many attendants as you need while the boy relaxes!"

I moved to politely reject his offer, but for some ungodly reason, Lady Agrippina nodded. *Huh? Wait a second. Are you tossing me to the wolves?!*

"Please. Do treat him well."

I looked at her in shock, and she flashed me a smooth smile.

Oh, gods. What in the world is she scheming now? I'm scared of being alone!

More importantly, this was an unthinkable scenario. I was her servant *and bodyguard*; why would the viscount dare try and pull me away from her? Although I understood that I looked like a mere display piece, being a kid and all, the mere suggestion of depriving a superior of her security was preposterous. It would be one thing to comply with an order that came from her, but offering stand-in attendants as compensation for isolation was horribly base and a major faux pas.

A retainer on a trip like this was akin to a private secretary: the expectation should have been that I was an important confidant whose presence would be a given during talks. No normal person would have the audacity to shoo me away.

Yet Lady Agrippina had agreed.

Hmm, I had no idea where this was headed—more precisely, the madam had *refused* to tell me to “minimize information leakage.” A likely excuse. Was I supposed to be a decoy in her grand design?

In that case, I wasn't exactly thrilled about my situation.

“If you'll follow me, young man, we shall see to your accommodations.”

Another knight—unarmored, probably because he'd been stationed on the premises—led me out of the western wing through a back door and to the annex I was meant to stay in. Although it was a notable three-story building, its exterior was simple and showed few signs of use. It was probably reserved for people like me: the guards, servants, and workers of real guests.

The staff offered me a royal reception, but I refused on grounds of fatigue and asked to be shown to my room. I was led to a suite fit to house a captain of an ordained troupe of knights, but the lavish lodging did nothing to take the edge off. They went out of their way to bring supper up to my room as well, but I wasn't exactly starving; a bath was heated up in my name, but I couldn't find it in me to partake.

All I could do was sit on the edge of my bed and think.

I had a feeling that things were going down tonight—an omen that was more premonition than guesswork. Lady Agrippina may have been a lazy homebody, but she was also the type to clean up tedious chores as quickly as she could when they had to be done. Here she was, separated from her beloved atelier; between lounging around in enemy territory and settling matters by day's end, it was clear which she'd choose.

And the other party at the table tonight was someone who'd put a

hit out on her. Whatever happened was *not* going to end amicably.

Which meant the reason she sent me off on my own...huh. Was the madam hedging against the chance that she might need to fight at full power by putting me in a place that wouldn't get caught in the cross fire?

I knew better than anyone else how frail I was. As I'd feared, my run-in with the myriapod demihuman had left a hairline fracture in my rib—though it had been fixed with magic—driving home the point that, for all my investment in combat, I was always at risk of dying if an attack connected with me.

Sure, I could roll off momentum to mitigate damage, but that only worked against sensible opponents. If an unrivaled master of the sword cut me, their blade would sever flesh and bone alike; if a space-bending mage caught me in their spell, I'd be blinked out of reality without a trace.

Lady Agrippina was an inhuman freak who was a touch too unbound by the limits of the universe for my swordplay to reach her, even at Scale IX. I still needed to pull out a few more screws with unfair skills and traits to reach the level of absurdity required to *think* about challenging her one-on-one. At the very minimum, I would have to be able to erase magic at the root, cutting through fortune and phenomena alike with my blade alone—and this would have to be with every passing strike, not just my most serious swings.

"Oh, so that's it? I'd just get in the way, huh?"

A vanguard who dies from the splash damage of their back line's spells is a useless vanguard. The only reason we tabletop players can laugh about throwing fireballs at our own tanks is because they have the HP to eat the hit and survive; not even we would accept collateral damage if it led to the death of a party member.

So if I wasn't worth using as her front line, this was Lady Agrippina's way of telling me to work within my means. Like, say, by distracting a portion of the enemy's forces.

Looking at the situation objectively just made me feel pathetic. While I was more than aware that I wasn't strong enough to pose a threat to archenemies like Lady Leizniz or the madam herself, forcing her to look out for me like this was incredibly vexing.

"Gods, it pisses me off when she throws everything my way, but being babied like this is just as annoying."

Emotions too complex to process sank into my gut as I leaned back onto the bedding. *Dammit, this mattress is nice. Why the hell can't I have this sort of thing when I actually get to use it?*

[Tips] Within the Trialist Empire's system of governance, lords ruling over named territories are akin to governors, but

they also serve as mayors of their region's capital city. Their direct subordinates—lords in their own right—are basically mayors of other major cities in the region. Knights and magistrates can be thought of as members on a city council.

An epicurean dinner; a splendid orchestral performance; and a popular musical drama set to the tunes, performed by the most revered troupe in all the county—these were the parts that made up Viscount Liplar's most successful night of hospitality, tuned through years and years of experience. Once this was over, he would prepare the most beautiful women in the viscounty for his male guests, or the most handsome knights in his barracks for his female guests, and have them receive his visitor in a more private setting.

Until now, this had been enough to get his way, whatever it was. Though he hadn't dealt with too many nobles from the inner circles of the Empire, shifting focus to more sterling topics had sufficed on the occasions he had. All he had to do was stick to the plan—that was what he told himself. But then he had to wonder: why was he still sweating bullets after showering Count Ubiorum with every amenity in his playbook?

"Whatever might be the matter, Viscount? You haven't touched your cup at all."

"Uh? Oh, well, ha! Ha ha! This wine is so far beyond what my palate can handle that my tongue couldn't keep up, is all! I should have expected nothing less from you, Count! Even your choice in drink is a cut above!"

The orc's laughter was utterly dry. He knew that this situation was enviable on paper; all he asked was that someone take it off his hands. Sipping top-notch wine alone with a top-notch woman would have made any man's mouth water, out of context. After the night of entertainment, she'd whispered in his ear that she wanted to speak with him in a more private setting; both viscount and count had retired to a tearoom carefully designed to shut out interference.

But before they'd convened, Agrippina had evidently stopped by the powder room, as she was no longer wearing the robe she'd arrived in. Dyed in her favorite scarlet, her dress stretched down to her feet in proper ladylike fashion—save for the deep slits cutting up into each leg and brazenly exposing swaths of tantalizing skin on the way. The only thing keeping both sides of the cleavage from flapping away was a set of thin, treacherous lace; without it, salacious fantasies of what might lie beyond her elegantly woven legs could begin to manifest themselves. Brought together by a silver pelt—either a wolf or fox—protecting her shoulders from the cold and a lavish fan held in hand, she was a charmer who could seduce more than just her fellow

humanfolk.

Alas, even so, the poor viscount could not summon an ounce of excitement for her. He knew himself to be a lustful man, keeping over twenty mistresses in addition to his young wife, but not even he could muster any strength between his legs when a dagger was digging into his throat.

By his estimate, this was all part of a game to the hollow beauty sitting across from him. She was toying with him, savoring his sorry reactions to everything she did or said.

In fact, she'd taken every opportunity to prod his weaknesses during the festivities—but even that was underselling it. The wickedness of her actions had been akin to carving out his flesh, lodging a great hunk of salt there, and then closing the wound with a cast of molten iron.

Every sentence contained an allusion to silver, or to daggers and the like. Context and repetition had joined together to produce a chilling statement: *I know what you've been doing, and I have the evidence to prove it.*

As if to mark the final nail in the coffin, her Seinian royal wine—a high-class vintage worth entire mansions, no less—was being poured out into a silver wineglass. But it wasn't just any silver cup: it was *pure*. The metal was popular amongst the nobility for its use in detecting arsenic, but an entire chalice of unalloyed silver was absurdly overdone: if this wasn't a threat, then what was? She knew about his hidden mines, and she didn't have to speak a word to tell him that.

"Please, there isn't any need to be modest. You're one of the most celebrated figures in the entire county; I picked this bottle from my collection thinking it would suit our meeting best. You partake in similar wines often, I'm sure."

"No, no, I would never be able to..."

"Humility in excess is poison to the soul, you know?"

It took everything the man had to keep his shoulders from jerking at the mention of *poison*.

Viscount Liplar had been looking for ways to kill her from the moment he'd received word of Count Ubiorum's impending arrival. However, he'd realized that his army and all the troops of his allied lords wouldn't be of any use when not a single one of the expensive assassins he'd hired had returned.

Besides, his scolding had come with information: apparently, this peerless beauty eyeing him with the sweetest of smiles was a one-woman army more than fit to don the title of polemurge if she so chose.

If physical means were out of the question, the natural course of

action would be to poison her. Unfortunately, few toxins were potent enough to fell a methuselah, and fewer still could get past a magus. Aristocrats were already prone to carrying enchanted talismans and arcane tools to stave off poison; trying to spike a specialist's food and drink would be utterly thoughtless.

As a result, the viscount had been forced to consider less palatable options. His plan was set and his preparations finished, but it was here that the viscount found himself backed into a corner.

"By the by, Viscount Liplar," Agrippina whispered, "I have a proposition for you."

"A...*proposition*, you say?"

"Quite. A very lucrative one, in fact. Tell me, wouldn't it be wonderful to legally distribute these lovely works of silver *within* the Empire?"

The man had thought it impossible for his heart to hurt any more than it already did, but in an instant, it skipped straight from missing a beat to the edge of bursting.

What is she trying to say?

Throughout the night, her words had lapped at his soul, driving home the point that she knew about his mines. As such, he'd been more than prepared to be challenged on that front...but his backroom dealings? He hadn't realized that she knew his goods were being sold abroad.

And so the question ate at his mind: What was she going to say next?

"It would be such an awful shame to lose a man of your talents," she sighed. "And all the more wasteful to lose you over petty rules and regulations."

"Wh-What, uh, whatever are you—"

"Writing off an undeclared silver mine or two as honest mistakes ready to be corrected would be all too easy with my help. Imagine: you'd be hailed as a hero for discovering greater bounty for the Empire."

Although his gut reaction was to doubt her, the viscount realized a moment later that she wasn't necessarily lying. Not only was the count a favorite of the Emperor's, but she was a major authority on the aeroship technology that was steering the nation's industrial power. He'd also heard rumors that she was personally close with the imperial families, and that Martin I had introduced her to all seven electorate houses.

Perhaps she really could get her way via brute force. At times, the facts were secondary to money and authority; with enough power, the blackest raven could be white, gold, or any color of the rainbow. It was well within the realm of possibility that she had the means to

save his hide.

“I’d like to avoid a dispute over the Liplar name. Besides, I’m sure you’ve had your own burdens to endure. With all this wealth, I can’t even imagine how many heartless vultures flocked around you... Oh, how the thought brings tears to my eyes.”

The vultures had, in fact, come to circle him.

Originally, House Liplar had been one of the parties embroiled in the Ubiorum fight for succession; but that ambition had met its end by the same hands that had bullied the viscount into drafting tonight’s plot.

Not only had the viscounty lost a newborn with Ubiorum blood, but its secret mining operation had been exposed. The position of viscount had become the equivalent of a walking purse, and while the deal had come with massive profits, the current head of house was an insignificant fellow dissatisfied with the situation.

Forgettable goons were ever prone to hoping for more than they were due. Just as he now buttered Agrippina up with a smile on his face, he’d long licked the boots of his backer while flipping him the bird behind his back. Had everything gone to plan, he could’ve used his ill-gotten fortune and his familial connection to House Ubiorum to lay claim to the entire county; the potential this forgotten glory represented clung fast to his mind, no matter how uncertain success may have been.

Though mortals forgot their debts quickly, grudges passed from generation to generation. Much like how the people of Kyushu had bottled up their hatred for over a century to bring down the great shogunate in Edo, Viscount Liplar could never forget the title of count that had been snatched out of his grasp, as if the title he’d inherited came hand in hand with the enduring resentment.

“Everyone needs a little spending money—it’s human nature. I completely understand. But what if, going forward, you could openly use your fortune without any mind to the attention it might bring? And it would be barely any smaller than what you have now. Weighing the two... Well, I’m sure you can see the difference.”

The untalented were quick to be moved. Gauging pros and cons took up the greater part of a shortsighted mind, and the slightest hint of a less resistant path was incredibly compelling.

Loyalty was adamant: it was built upon ideology, hardened into a tightly knit core unassailable to the outside world. The only recourse was to smash it to bits or to swap it out for something new.

Spite was unforgettable: it could never be wiped away. Although a new coat of paint could hide hard feelings, it would only serve to hide the lower layer, a heart stained deep in hues of bitterness and hatred.

However, incentives were a different story. No one knew what

would happen ten years from now, and thus the promise of immediate payout was sure to persuade. There wasn't any guarantee that such a decision would lead to a happier future in a decade's time, of course, but that was a separate matter.

"All I ask is one simple thing: swear fealty to me. Do that...and perhaps I might adopt a son of yours. I don't have any plans to marry, you see, and I'm sure you can imagine where I'm heading with this. Methuselah..."

"...D-Don't have many children."

"Yes, precisely. But I can't rule out the possibility of *misfortune* befalling me. I need a capable heir, just in case. Yet I have no interest in marriage—His Majesty even warned me that he would like to keep the voices at the table of aership development from growing any further."

A thin layer of rouge became a voluptuous red, and the words these lips formed were terrifyingly moving. Sending a son to the count's side would bring the county within reach; even if he failed to inherit the house himself, their bloodline would gain legitimacy in the line of succession. With that, the most trivial twist of fate might place the Ubiorum name in Liplar hands—perhaps, the viscount thought, even while he was still alive.

"What do you say, Viscount Liplar? Take my hand—I shall give you all that you desire. My only request is that you tell me who led you off the just path. That's all it takes for *everything* to go your way."

"I-I, er, I am a proud and loyal servant to the Empire, and I have never done anything—"

"Viscount, please. It's only us. What could there ever be to fear? Won't you please tell me? That's the only thing left stopping you from seeing the breathtaking view at the top... Or would you prefer a twine necklace instead?"

Sweet nectar lay side by side with frightful threat; the viscount wiped away the greasy sweat running down his face and swallowed hard. His thoughts began to tangle: things were already in motion, but maybe he could order his men to stop now. Yet his orders had been to carry out the plan when the time came no matter what else happened. It was more than likely too late. But then again, how upset would she really be over one measly kid?

The viscount took another gulp. His spit was so hard that he felt like it might cut his throat open from the inside, but he finally opened his mouth...

"An ill-advised decision, Viscount."

...only to be cut off by a reproving voice.

"Huh?! Wait, th-this voice!"

The orc frantically turned to and fro, his head whipping around as

if someone were slapping him; yet he and Agrippina were the only two in the cramped room. Nothing had changed: not the handful of paintings on the wall, nor the small flowerpot on the desk, nor even the tea table with only enough room for two.

Totally panicked, the viscount scrambled to find the source of the voice. Not only did this room have an antimagic barrier, but it had been physically soundproofed as well. It should have been impossible to listen in, and to his knowledge, the gods offered no miracles to an end as base as eavesdropping. *So where is he?!*

While the man frantically searched, Agrippina moistened her lips with a sip of wine and casually responded.

“My, I wasn’t aware you’d be joining us, Marquis.”

“Of course. If you were to come, Wit figured a greeting was in order, and accepted the viscount’s invitation to prepare your reception.”

“Wh-Where?! Where are you?! Show yourself, Marquis Donnersmarck!”

Naturally, the one to interrupt the count’s temptation had been the very same man who’d fed the viscount information and strung him along like a puppeteer.

Tired of the dim-witted viscount’s antics, Agrippina pointed at the flowerpot. He ran over in a frenzy and hoisted it up; much to his surprise, he had uncovered one end to a speaking tube. The receiver was engraved with hexes designed to boost its ability to pick up sound, and it cleverly blended into the pattern of the wallpaper on top of being placed behind the removed vase. No amount of acoustic deafening or thaumaturgic protection could keep the goings-on of the room private when this pipe was carrying all conversation to another location.

“Wh-What is this?! When did this get here?!”

“Building the room is very good, Viscount, but it won’t do to skip on maintenance. Wit understand that this is your own home, but it isn’t as if you spend every waking moment in it. The only way to notice when something is out of place is to carefully check—wouldn’t you agree?”

“Ah... Agh! Arghhh!”

The viscount threw the celadon vase from a faraway land, scattering its pieces and the roses it once held across the ground. Still his wrath was not abated, and he grabbed the mouth of the pipe, yanking the whole thing straight out of the wall with brute strength. With it came the wood and chunks of plaster it had been installed in; evidently, the contraption had been fashioned to extend to a lower floor.

“My, what a dated contrivance,” Agrippina commented. “Come

now, Viscount. Inspecting your home with every return is a must—either by your hand or a trusted retainer’s.”

“Sh-Shut up! W-Was this a trap?! Are you and the marquis conspiring against me?!”

“What in the world would I even stand to gain from that?”

“Wit agree with her completely.”

The supposedly locked door smoothly opened to welcome a new, uninvited guest. Marquis Donnersmarck entered wearing a modern fit, styled with slim pants and a vest to match. He displayed no shame whatsoever over having renovated a nominal ally’s private conference room unsolicited; the smile plastered on his face was as gentle and kind as ever. Though he seemed like the sort of genial fellow too neighborly to cast judgment on anyone, something about his innocent demeanor came with a hollow air.

“Viscount Liplar, you disappoint me... Wit told you that all would be well should you follow my plans, and yet you were still convinced by that blatant sweet talk. Don’t you remember my words? ‘Hold fast no matter how honeyed her words may be.’ Did you truly think that Count Ubiorum would let you live?”

“How rude of you, Marquis. I’ll have you know that I err on the side of magnanimity. By my estimate, he would have had a happy five years or so to enjoy.”

“Hm? Is this your unaffected self, Agrippina? Interesting—ah, yes, splendid indeed. Wit can only hope that you remain this way in front of me always.”

Viscount Liplar was still trembling in rage, but the marquis nonchalantly walked by to claim his now-unoccupied seat. With a dainty touch, he lifted up the bottle of wine and read the label.

“Ooh, a Seinian red Bas-Rhin, and 224 years, at that! Complete with the royal seal of ‘virgin’s blood.’ This is a gorgeous drink, Agrippina. Even Wit only have a handful in my collection. Isn’t this a tad overdone for a night with Viscount Liplar?”

“I have no interest in drinking liquors beneath my tastes. I may accept whatever is offered in public settings, but if I have the right to choose, I shall.”

“D-Don’t ignore me! Listen here, Marquis Donnersmarck! I don’t care how distinguished you are; you’ve crossed the—”

Unable to bear being forgotten in favor of a cordial chat, the viscount began his objection—but was unable to finish it. As soon as the marquis pointed at him, the orc started silently flapping his lips like a fish waiting to be fed, and then grasped at his neck. The paleness of complexion that had come with his anxiety was rapidly overwritten with a remarkable blush fueled not by rage, but by suffocation.

Annoyed by the fool's yapping, the marquis had deleted the oxygen from the air around his head. He collapsed, writhing around on the floor. Meanwhile, the methuselah had poured himself a cupful of wine—after thoroughly wiping down the chalice with a napkin—and begun to drink. By the time he swallowed the last drop, the room was silent.

“Is that not an issue?”

Having watched but not helped, Agrippina pointed to the lifeless sack that had moments ago been Viscount Liplar. The marquis answered with the face of a man who wouldn't hurt a fly.

“With all that you already know, what use could he possibly serve? In any case, Wit have no need for a bothersome piece that chooses its master. Whether he is here or not, the silver will continue to flow. Plenty of my children draw Liplar blood, and preparing a more convenient pawn will be a trivial affair.”

“Is that so? I can't imagine you inspire much confidence in those you command. Even the most insignificant, minor pawn can serve its purpose—but I must admit I'm a tad jealous of how deep your toy box is. An advantage afforded by your head start in imperial politics, I suppose.”

“If you would deprive me of that edge, then Wit would truly have no foot to stand on. You've turned the playing field upside down in a bombastic way, and naturally, my only hope of contesting you is to bring the battle to where Wit hold the advantage.”

Despite the corpse in the corner of the room, the pair were all smiles as they went back and forth over drinks. That is, until Agrippina's ear twitched.

This room may have been fortified, but some amount of sound continued to leak in and out. There was something going on at the building's annex, and the sound of clashing metal suggested it wasn't a friendly welcoming party. Unfortunately, she had no means of checking from within the room, and she couldn't send her servant a telepathic message either.

That said, Agrippina had completed her read on the balance of power. Reminding herself that there was no need to worry, she slowly reached into her pocket and asked, “Do you mind if I help myself?”

“A woman, smoking? It isn't exactly the most illustrious of pastimes.”

“Oh, Marquis, don't be so old fashioned. Plenty of ladies enjoy an occasional puff nowadays.”

After all, even Agrippina herself would have to put in a smidge of real effort to kill that boy as he was now. He'd surely handle whatever they threw at him with ease. And if the servant was to manage his tasks, then it was only fair that the master play her part and finish

hers.

[Tips] The Empire has a system that is at once somewhat similar to and completely unlike plea bargaining on Earth, wherein a criminal party can be pardoned for their wrongdoings on account of great value provided to the nation. The specifics are unwritten in law, only given short mention as an exceptional clause that may be invoked within the walls of the imperial office.

In summary, the Emperor may overlook what he deems necessary evils for the continued glory of the Empire, or for “the continued glory of the Empire.”

A group of men clad in silent gear sneaked through the darkness. They slunk through the halls, making their way into the annex of Viscount Liplar’s personal estate.

Eventually, they came across a splendid room reserved for guests of honor. The short man at the helm produced a small tube from his pocket: both ends were shaped like funnels, one larger than the other. Meant to be used by doctors examining their patients’ heartbeats, it doubled as a tool for listening in on a room from beyond the door.

For a few minutes, the man placed the device on the door and listened with bated breath. No sound.

They’d already confirmed the room was dark from the outside. The guest seemed to have gone to bed early, just as he’d said he would—but of course he did. His supper had been laced with a minor dose of sedatives. He wouldn’t pass out on the spot, but ingestion was sure to make him drowsier than he otherwise would have been. This sort of trickery was standard fare for the viscount’s crew: their chef was also a trained apothecary, and the dosage was sure to be perfectly tuned.

The agent with the listening tool nodded and made way for a larger member of the team to step up with the master key for every lock in the annex in hand. At times, a simple spare meant to cover for a lost key could become the ticket to a clean murder. The lock was regularly oiled for just such occasions; with a gentle touch, the key fit snugly inside and could turn without a single sound.

Yet even with the door unlocked, the hitmen refrained from swinging it open. Instead, they cracked it ajar and cautiously peered inside. As expected, the room was lightless and lifeless. Just to cover their bases, the man in front reached in with a pocket mirror in hand to confirm that no one was lying in wait behind the door.

The only presence was a person-sized mound in the bed. The covers had been pulled up past the pillows, probably to cut off any

light or sound; though they couldn't make out the target's breathing through the thick layers of sheets, it was clear that he was fast asleep.

After checking every item off their thorough list, the men finally stepped inside. They lined up at the side of the bed, each pulling out a weapon from underneath their cloak: an eastern crossbow.

During the Second Eastern Conquest, the mounted desert natives had used these weapons to great effect against the imperial army. Designed to fold in two, a hook protruded out to snag on the bowstring when the stock was folded up, allowing the wielder to reload it with a relatively light pull on a lever. This mechanism made it possible to load the deadly weapon on horseback, and the Empire's soldiers had brought it back home once the war was over. For as many friends as they'd lost to the things, even they had to admit they were good arms.

A long way from home, the technology now enabled a group of assassins to unleash on the sleeping figure. Five thick bolts sank into the blankets. These projectiles had earned the epithet of "knight-killers" for how easily they pierced solid armor; this was beyond overkill.

Still, the men stayed alert and readied a second volley. The skewered victim didn't budge, but the men waited at the ready for a few seconds before the large fellow who'd opened the door gave a signal with his hand. Two quick waves forward: he was ordering the others to confirm the kill.

The men on each flank obliged; one was posturing to shoot, and the other tore off the blankets in one swift motion.

"He's not here!" he exclaimed in a hushed tone.

Where they should have found a dead boy, the vanguard had instead unveiled a bundle of spare blankets fashioned into a human shape.

"Shit! Did he get away?!"

The order to search was on the tip of the large man's tongue, but such commands were wholly unnecessary. After all, he had come to them: sword in hand and clad in armor, the would-be victim leapt out from the wardrobe.

[Tips] Eastern crossbows were popularized by the minor desert lords to the Trialist Empire's east, but are in fact endemic to the Eastern Empire on the other side. Modern Rhinians have come to acknowledge the utility of the weapons; research and development has continued based on the reverse engineering carried out during the war.

Although they fail to match the stopping power of traditional crossbows, the ease of reloading offered enables use on cavalry,

and allows competent marksmen to fire off fifteen bolts in a minute's time. The advantages the foreign design presents are highly regarded, and military consensus is that it will become the new standard going forward.

What was I supposed to say? I mean, did they *really* think I'd waltz into enemy territory and leisurely help myself to their food, drink, and bed?

Perhaps our enemies had thought that we'd totally let our guards down upon sending away our personal guards and crossing the Liplar border. Unfortunately for them, I was too fainthearted for that.

I'd secretly thrown out my dinner, water and all, and fashioned a body double to take my place in bed; meanwhile, I was sitting in the wardrobe, taking a nap while cradling Schutzwolfe in a full set of armor. If nothing happened, I would awake in the morning a bit worse for wear and laugh off my excessive paranoia; if they did come, I was ready to cut them down to the last.

But to think I'd *actually* have to steel myself for this.

Ugh, what a pain. They were just as desperate as I was, so keeping them alive for information would... No, it was time to drop the charade: pulling punches because *I* didn't want to kill them wouldn't fly here.

These weren't common thugs or bandits who'd count toward a larger payday alive. All I'd get for sparing them was more danger. If they were ready to come after my life in a situation like this, then failure was a fate equivalent to dying in battle; they knew that better than anyone else, and would keep chasing me so long as they drew breath. Even if I knocked them out, they'd resume the attack as soon as they regained consciousness. The future of the entire viscounty rode on tonight: the knights and soldiers here fought for their children, their wives, and the honor of their family names.

Then I guess the only exchange left to be had is one of life or death.

"Grah?!"

I leapt out, focusing all my momentum into my blade to cut into the apparent commander from the shoulder down. A jolt shot up into me as the blow connected with something hard, but I'd cleanly sliced through his relatively light coverings: my sword had crashed through his spine.

"Captain—hrgh!"

Schutzwolfe's tip did not reach the floor—before she could follow through, I shifted the angle of my swing to run parallel to the ground, keeping low to split open another man's knee. After a deep swipe, I'd left his left calf perilously attached to the rest of his body. If he didn't get magical or miraculous treatment soon, he'd never walk again.

But if I was being honest with myself, he'd bleed out long before then.

"Where the hell did—*augh?*!"

"Shit! Call for back—*mmfgh!*"

I'd been watching from inside the closet all this time; I knew how these things worked. My Unseen Hands plucked two crossbows off the assassins I'd already felled and fired at the pair on the other side of the bed. One took a bolt to the shoulder, and the other to his gut—an unfortunate spot. With his stomach pierced, he'd need to carefully patch up his abdomen if he wanted to live for any longer than a few minutes.

That's four down, one to— Oh no you don't.

The last killer finally managed to react, pointing his weapon my way. I dragged up the man with the busted knee to serve as my shield, and in a stroke of misfortune, the bolt landed square between his eyes.

That was awful of me... Too late now, though.

My hands had been soaked in blood from the day I killed Helga. I could tell myself I had no other choice, but at the end of the day that didn't make the weight any easier to bear. I'd murdered her—I'd given up on her future to preserve my own.

I'd killed again in the hallway of that inn, blinded by rage. I'd felt so sick of myself that I spent the entire night cradling my knees and staring up at the moon. But three days later, I was back to eating hearty meals without any issue.

That had been the moment it finally sank in: I was already firmly planted in a world where the trade in human life was swift and eager. And if my hands were already stained, then what was another layer of taint for the sake of my own future?

Besides, these guys were here to take my life; they had no right to complain if I ended up taking theirs!

"*Nghf?!*"

"Sorry, I can't afford to go easy."

Laying Schutzwolfe horizontally, I grabbed her by the blade with my left hand and used my right to guide her upward. In a swift stab that gave him no time to reload, my sword pierced the underarmor around his neck and entered through the jaw to burrow out of his skull. On top of piercing his windpipe and brain alike, I gave Schutzwolfe a light twist, boring out enough flesh to pull her out without snagging. The man fell over, instantly lifeless. He couldn't so much as twitch: with his brain stem snapped, any nervous signal carrying orders was doomed to be trapped in his head forever.

Three confirmed kills, and two half-dead.

"Ugh, hng, oww—*augh?*!"

"Count your blessings that you're alive and sit still."

I went back to crush the third man's other shoulder to totally disarm him.

Although this seemed like a one-sided beatdown, I couldn't let myself slip. I'd held the advantage *because* I'd managed to take them all out before they could react, not the other way around; if I pulled my foot off the gas, the risk of injury was real. Assassins were the most cutthroat of opponents—and it looked like I was in for a second helping.

Thudding footsteps echoed in from the hall beyond the door. They'd prepared more people to close in on me in case the first squad failed.

Well then, let's see what the viscount's personal knights are made of. Apologies, gentlemen—I'm starting this fight at full force.

I raised my hand to summon my spells, and Helga's gemstone glimmered disapprovingly in the moonlight.

“The hell's going on?! What's the holdup for one...lone...brat?”



“Do I *look* alone to you? That’s a shame.” Reinforcements burst through the door and froze in striking confusion. I would’ve liked to capture their likenesses and frame them; they belonged by the entry for “flat-footed rubes” in the dictionary. “You’re up against seven. Looks like you didn’t bring enough men.”

Who could blame them? I doubted they’d expected to see five crossbows and a sword floating in midair, hovering around a swordsman wielding a terrifying, jet-black blade.

A volley of crossbow bolts intercepted the new invaders. The werewolf who’d opened the door—presumably the unit’s captain—looked solidly built with all his hairs standing on end, but even the sturdiest body couldn’t withstand the focused fire; he went flying.

Tossing three of the empty crossbows, I used two of my newly freed Hands to reload the remaining ones, and the last to pick up a longsword dropped by the original squadron. Armed once more, I jumped over the limp werewolf and into the hallway.

Ooh, they sure brought out the welcome wagon. The knights who’d been lying in wait had rushed over in droves. Still, they must’ve underestimated me as just a single kid: they were largely unarmored, much to my convenience.

Not wanting to dive in recklessly only to be skewered by spears and swords from every angle, I threw out a mystic flashbang. I dashed into the dazed crowd, slicing with all three of my swords; the reinforcements were gone in the blink of an eye. I wasn’t going to struggle against blinded foes—this had been easy pickings.

“Okay, now what?”

Walking along the blood-soaked halls, I considered my next move. Daylight had completely forsaken us, but the False Moon was hiding tonight and the Mother Goddess’s true form shone with exalted vigor. I couldn’t count on fey support—I doubted they’d even be able to materialize.

In my pockets, I had five more flashbangs and three sticks of thermite. I couldn’t justify using the Daisy Petal spell given my surroundings—the thought of putting uninvolved servants in the line of fire ate at my conscience—so that was it for my arsenal. That meant I wouldn’t be able to brute-force things with magic alone. A viscount’s personal abode was sure to be crawling with guards, and that was all the more true with Lady Agrippina here to visit.

I guess I might as well head toward the manor. I could hardly imagine myself being the priority target, which meant the madam was sure to be suffering some kind of attack on her end. Split up as we were, common tactical sense dictated that regrouping was the best course of action.

And on the way, I'd cut down anyone in my path.

"Another serving? Glad to see the hospitality isn't slowing down."

Spurred on by the silence on the upper floor, another group came marching up the stairs. That said, there were only *three* of them—not even remotely a threat. It seemed like they'd left a skeleton crew to deal with me while the majority of their forces went to subjugate Lady Agrippina.

Well, while I was sure some might disagree, I figured these guys had gotten the better draw. With any luck, they might even survive the night.

One came down on me with a sharp battle cry, but I knocked his blade away and slashed through his right elbow with a floating sword. Keeping the other two swordlocked with my other Hands, I took each down with a thickly laid-on serving of crossbow bolts.

Skill was no longer prerequisite to my one-way massacres; this was the full form of a build fashioned after fixed values. Every roll of the dice was a mere formality: anything between the poles of fumbling and criticality would accomplish the same thing. Though some would deride this as boring, I couldn't think of anything more satisfying than to conquer fortune with the fruits of my own effort—this was beauty in its finest form.

I tore through another handful of knights on my way downstairs and stepped outside. The midnight gales of early spring were still frigid, and even under a full set of repaired armor, my skin was covered in goosebumps.

Brr, it's cold. These were the sorts of nights that I would've liked to spend huddled up by a hearth... *Oh, I know!*

Just walking into the main manor would be too humdrum. Instead, I could light the thing on fire to stir up some confusion. While the estate undoubtedly came equipped with the means to fight a fire on the premises, I doubted it'd be enough to handle my arcane thermite. I'd heard that the peasants of Edo had lit mansions ablaze out of anger or simply in pursuit of warmth; why not take after them? If nothing else, I was sure it'd be a dazzling show that would warm me up.

But as I made my way to the main hall, a faint tingling of ill omen nipped at my back.

Permanent Battlefield had given me a warning, and I heeded: tumbling forward, I glanced back to see something stuck in the ground I'd occupied a moment prior—*four* somethings, in fact. They didn't seem like arrows, but they were too deeply buried for me to get a good look. The sound had led me to envision throwables, like perhaps stones slung from the rooftops; yet that seemed out of place for a nobleman's personal knights.

My evasion must have been factored into the enemies' calculations, as I sensed something else coming my way. Another set of projectiles barreled toward me at violent speeds, and despite being too fast to track, I had a hunch as to where they were going to land.

Combining my four floating swords—I'd picked up more to keep my reloading Hands busy—with the Craving Blade, I wove together a shield of arms to cover my head, neck, and core. Twelve projectiles, all keenly aimed at my vitals, bounced off.

Are those counterweights? You don't see that every day.

Sailing through the air, a set of tipless metal cones gleamed dimly under the shining moon. The narrower end led to a lead chain that allowed the weight to slither back to its wielder.

Tracing the links, I saw four figures emerge from the shadows: two clung to the manor's outer wall, one was waiting on the second floor of the annex, and the last stood directly in my path.

At long last, I had a good look. The backlit sunset had gotten in my way last time, but with the moon this bright, there was no mistaking it: they were sepa. The one standing before me had an all-too-familiar presence—that of an assassin I'd come to know in the time since this Ubiorum episode had begun.

"I recognize you: hard to notice yet a menace in battle. Are you giving me a chance to avenge my cracked rib?"

I pointed my sword her way, but she said nothing in return. In lieu of a response, she bared her extra set of arms without hesitation, revealing two long metal poles with weighted chains on each end.

What a crazy set of weapons! Mensch could never dream of handling such unwieldy tools. I should've known a world this cosmopolitan would come with unimaginable weaponry!

I would have been incredibly excited, if only my first look at the things hadn't come with four lead weights that needed dodging. Not only was her sepa footwork as difficult to grasp as ever, but the projectiles were supersonic. If I let one land, a serious injury was guaranteed regardless of armor; a hit to the head would cave in my helmet and skull alike.

The other three synced up, combining for a total of sixteen objects zipping all around me. This was bad: evading everything was as hard as avoiding the fallen leaves whipped up in a tornado. Worse still, they were meticulous with the placement of each attack. I wouldn't have struggled to keep up if they were all aiming for my vitals, but they threw in feints and suppressing fire toward my hands and feet; I needed to accurately assess the course of each and act accordingly.

Dammit, they're good—all of them! I guess she wasn't at her best back on the rooftop.

Though I was getting by with my extra swords for now, I couldn't

keep this up forever. Blocking enough of the projectiles to dodge the rest put me on a razor's edge, and this level of focus was hard to maintain. If I didn't put an end to this soon, they'd reduce me to a mass of pulped tissues haphazardly bagged in a human skin.

Yet I didn't have a way in! Three of them clung to unreachable walls, and the one on equal ground kept retreating every time I advanced. With all this covering fire, I couldn't close the gap.

In which case, these things have gotta go first!

"...?!" I could feel my enemy's surprise resonate through their chain.

After dodging a strike aimed at my leg, I stomped on the projectile before they had a chance to draw it back. But of course, I didn't delude myself into thinking that'd be enough to hold it in place. My foes had the size advantage: a tug-of-war would produce an instant loss.

Instead, I abandoned the crossbows I'd been threatening counterattacks with and slammed their bolts through gaps in the chain's links, pinning it to the ground. With this, I'd effectively eliminated two projectiles from one of the— *Hey, wait! That comes off?! Hold on, you can still use it with only one weight?!*

This is so unfair!

The killer unlinked the pinned chain from the handle and continued harassing me with the unbalanced weapon. If I'm being honest, I really hadn't expected their arms to be so advanced. I'd just assumed that the chains were welded on for stability and strength.

Fine, I've got more tricks. Another chain whizzed past my face; as soon as it went taut, I had it. Even with Divine swordplay and a blade that transcended the bounds of mortal craftsmanship, slicing through a flexible chain in open air was a herculean task. Yet all I needed was one instant of tightly drawn rigidity.

With a low, dreadful crack, the metal shattered. All that remained was a short chain, stripped of its threat and impossible to control.

I yanked one more chain with an Unseen Hand and knotted up another with two spare swords; one by one, I thinned out the torrential rain of projectiles. Every chain disarmed gave me more room to breathe; with fewer attacks to block, my swords had all the more opportunity to retaliate.

Around the time I'd eliminated half of them, fortune struck.

The add-ons I'd taken for Unseen Hand had turned my invisible appendages from toy tweezers to the brawny arms of a fully grown bodybuilder. Still, I knew a single Hand couldn't beat a sepa in a contest of raw strength...but what about *all six*?

When sixteen lead weights had been tearing through the air, I'd been forced to dedicate all my resources toward defense. However, the

same could no longer be said; with the storm of metal abating, I grabbed one of the chains and pulled it with everything I had.

Entirely abandoning defense, even for a moment, was a massive gamble—but it paid off. Ripped from the safety of the wall, the centipede tumbled toward me, flailing.

Reconstructing the wall of swords to cover my rear, I sprinted to catch his landing. Though he made a frantic attempt to right himself, it was clear that being yanked off-balance was a new experience. Despite raising his weapon to shield himself, without proper footing or posture, the attempt was no better than a plea for mercy. *Your trunk's wide open!*

One down! Timed perfectly, the Craving Blade reclaimed its original form to place the pinnacle of her massive arc halfway through the falling sepa's body. As I tore through the middle of his trunk, I could feel bones and carapace alike disintegrate; the acceleration from the gravitational assist gave way to a hand-numbing collision, but I held firm to complete the strike.

The sepa screamed and thrashed about, scattering blood as red as any mensch's. Evidently, not even *this* was enough to kill. Centipedes were hardy critters who would keep biting even if their body was chopped in two—a lesson I'd learned a lifetime ago when visiting my grandmother's rural hometown for summer break. While we'd used boiling water and detergent to kill those pests, I didn't have them on me now, and using my limited supply of thermite as a finisher was such a waste.

After all, they were still *mortal*: a severed head was more than enough.

Just as I leapt forward to seal the deal, the other sepa clinging to the main hall gave up the high ground to pounce on me.

You care about your friend, huh? I respect that! But now you're playing in my range!

Her long metal poles suddenly became a hindrance, and the other two couldn't support them without risking friendly fire. Unable to make full use of her weapon in close quarters, the assassin was wide open for a flurry of quick swipes. She swung with the whole of her considerable strength, but four swords were enough to stop it. I used my last two Hands to pull at her chains and throw her off-balance, making sure to land as many hits as possible regardless of how lethal each strike proved.

Fingers went flying, with a whole hand following suit; I was quickly reducing her to mincemeat. Although her armor was tough enough to ward off any fatal blows, at this rate it was only a matter of time.

Yet when the kill was finally in sight, the hail of lead resumed

once more; simultaneously, the cornered assassin pulled the same trick that had thrown me off back at the inn rooftop: kicking her large trunk up, she bought herself space to run away.

Hm? And while I hadn't been looking, the half-sundered sepa had vanished. It looked like the second one had been buying time; unlike most wetworkers, I guessed these sepa didn't operate on the principle of "failure equals death." Maybe the possibility of redeeming themselves in battle outweighed the shame of returning home in tatters.

Well, I supposed if anyone had the money to put together two nearly bisected halves, it would be a marquis. Survivors had their own appeal weighed against loyal sacrifices, so I supposed it was a shrewd policy either way.

But boy, was I starting to run out of breath. Not even I had the stamina to do this forever. We had to have been at this for half an hour at least—I needed to end this sooner rather than later.

Both the assassin on the annex and the one I'd crossed paths with once before began to close the distance on me.

I knew that their teamwork was perfect; not once had any of their sixteen chained projectiles gotten in another's way. If they were pushing up now to crush me two-on-one, then my best course of action was clear: take one out first.

I bolted toward the assassin who'd been manning the annex. He threw two chains my way, and I knocked them aside; two more came to sweep my legs from behind, but I entangled those in a floating sword each. But with a deft maneuver, the man managed to redirect his deflected weights to swing back toward my head, forcing me to duck low in order to dodge.

Unfortunately for him, I was in the perfect range to toss my catalysts.

For all my casual commentary on how I'd *never* use it on a real person, a stick of mystic thermite sailed through the air. Even after bringing up the Craving Blade to shield my eyes, the intense brilliance of the reaction threatened to cook my retinas. Flames thousands of degrees hot bloomed in the blink of an eye, torching the assassin alive.

His screams were too profoundly pained to be captured by words. Lowering my sword, I saw a living ball of flames desperately rolling around.

Sorry, but that's not gonna cut it. Powered by chemical reaction, neither water nor mud would put the flames out. His frenzied panic managed to fling off bits of the superheated material, but the blaze wouldn't dissipate until the reaction had run its course.

That said, it wasn't burning him as well as I'd expected. Had my magical tweaks to the reaction's length affected the strength of

combustion somehow? No, that couldn't be it—my results in the practice room had proven as much. In which case, his cloak and armor probably had some sort of flame-retardant enchantment built in.

Still, his face was melting and I'd surely robbed him of his vision. With the catalyzing solution stuck to his face, he was going to suffer too much damage to remain a real threat. I didn't know whether DoT would secure the kill, but he couldn't stay on the battlefield any longer.

Now, the only thing left to do was to clean up the last remaining — *Whoa, what the hell?!*

An unexpected line of attack caught me off guard: the final assassin had thrown one of her weapons at me *whole*. I ducked; the rod-and-chains that zipped past spun so wildly that it looked like a single flat disc. In the time I was busy dodging, the final sepa removed the chains from either end of her polearm and gripped them tightly in her lower set of hands.

"I see. So this is your *real* melee style." I could hear the wailing diminish in the distance: the assassin was escaping, even while burning alive. He could run as far as he wished—I didn't have the time to stop him. I needed to settle this fight and get to the main manor to support Lady Agrippina. "Let's finish this."

"Words are cheap."

At long last, she spoke. Her voice was the same as it had been in the palace: charming and easy on the ears. Who knows? Maybe if it hadn't been steeped in animosity, it would have been enough to woo me. Well, that, and if it hadn't come with two chains whizzing by on either side, boxing me into a narrow lane.

Hoisting her polearm high into the air, she began to spin it with the force of a jet engine's fan. She swerved from side to side, obscuring her intentions and using the centrifugal force to bolster the threat of her lead whips. I'd always thought this sort of thing had been a cinematic invention thought up to look stylish, but facing it in battle was as problematic as it was intimidating.

Blocking the hit wasn't an option. She had the advantage of height, gravity, and angular momentum bolstering a battlestaff that most mensch would struggle to lift. Even with all five of my swords *plus* my two spare Hands, she'd crush me. The Craving Blade would hold firm, but the rest—even Schutzwolfe—would crack, not to mention my fragile arms.

Parrying a strike this forceful was also a no-go. A plank of wood diagonal to a stream could redirect its current, but it'd snap in half when faced with the torrential rapids of a flooding river.

I liked it. The whole of her being came through in this one attack: she'd kill me or die trying. How could I hate something so gallant and

forthright?

In fact, I was flattered: she'd surmised that she *needed* to go this far just to grasp at some chance of victory. It looked like I'd gotten pretty strong after all.

All right then. I'll answer with everything I've got.

Putting my gimmicks to rest, I prepared myself for the counterattack. I let my Hands fizzle away to dedicate all my concentration into one strike, letting every last neuron dial in on the moment. Endowed with Insight, my eyes did not tunnel in on any one point, instead taking in even the most minute movements as fragments of the greater whole; I processed the stimuli as part of a Permanent Battlefield, acutely aware of every element that made up the big picture.

At the apex of focus, my Lightning Reflexes kicked in. Time dilated; submerged in flow state, I followed the golden path laid out for me in a slow world where the next move was always certain.

I heard the sound of screeching chains. With an expert flick of her wrists, she'd whipped them back from past me to loop in toward my head and back—easily avoided with a simple crouch.

The weights went wide, opening a path for their master to rush in, her staff still held overhead. Despite the infamy of weaponized chains and ropes coming back to bite their wielder, I hadn't gotten my hopes up. She was a master of her craft; in a contest of Dexterity alone, there was a real chance she was my equal.

Her footwork was too erratic and her eyes too well hidden by her hood to read her intent from those, but I'd finally gotten used to it. Watching her writhing footwork wouldn't help, but the angle her trunk twisted at was set in stone. Every time she summoned her strength to attack, her legs and trunk had to sync up.

Like now!

She did not shout; she employed no dramatic flourish; she struck with technique honed to bring death and nothing more. Despite starting with the staff hoisted up, she swung up slantwise from below to make her blow as difficult to intercept as possible.

But I had a read on her. The reach her polearm provided generally made it hard to invade her space, but that was only the case if I didn't know what was coming. One beat late and I'd throw myself into her attack; one beat early and she'd have time to correct her course. Victory invariably lay on the precipice of defeat, and I leapt into close quarters.

It wasn't the flashiest moment, but this was what a duel between masters was like. There was a good reason why old samurai flicks always ended with blink-and-you'll-miss-it exchanges.

Having dodged her death blow and earned myself perfect

positioning, I opted for a clean uppercut. As her arms came down, the Craving Blade went up and severed two at the forearm.

Yet that wasn't the end: my opponent was my size several times over, and had one out left. If she could tackle me and constrict me with her trunk, she would walk away the victor. Immediately tossing her staff, she reached out with her remaining limbs.

Too bad. I had a read on this too.

I slipped under her attempt to grab me, quickly hopping up onto the back of her lower body. She whirled around in an attempt to catch me, but I'd already kicked off; twirling back, I slashed at her while fading away. Truth be told, I'd been aiming for her neck, but she'd managed to pull back her left hand to survive the hit.

Still, three arms was hardly a cheap price to pay. I skipped backward a few times, eyeing her next move from a safe distance. But three flooding wounds and one arm weren't enough to fight me with. The battle was all but settled.

"Hrgh... Ngh..."

Evidently, losing three limbs was finally enough to draw a pained groan from beneath the veil. Yet even now, she wouldn't back down: she produced a spare chain from her pocket in a stunning display of valor.

If nothing else, she had earned my respect for showing the most zeal in battle of any foe I'd faced thus far. She was prouder than the kidnapping mage; nobler than the crazed Helga; more vivacious than the undead adventurer looking for an heir; and more sincere than the masked nobleman.

Few were the occasions in life where one could receive such genuine emotion from another. *You're making me blush.*

Fine, then. While I could leave her here now that she posed no threat, I decided to see our dance through till the end. How could I call myself a man if I refused to face the boiling core of bloodlust glaring at me?

For our final bout, I would take her head in one swift stroke. An easy death was the least I could do to honor the efforts of a masterful warrior. Ready to lunge, I held my sword beside me and took one step—when a piercing noise split the air.

Something had been thrown at incredible speeds. Looking over, I saw a lead weight with something tied to it soaring through the moonlit skies like a whistling arrow. Strangely, it wasn't aiming for me. It landed instead by the final assassin, and a moment later, flooded the night with a blinding radiance.

I put up an arm and lowered it once the light was gone, only to find that my foe had vanished with it.

Turning in the direction the projectile had come from, I saw a

fleeing figure trailed by smoke. The singed holes in his cloak identified him as the assassin I'd torched with thermite. Not only was I surprised that he'd stuck around to wait for an opportune moment, but I was shocked that he could move at all.

"What a flashy retreat," I grumbled.

I'd been had. I'd noticed earlier that they preferred dishonorable escape over glorious death; it seemed the others had forced their companion to run.

Furthermore, whatever they'd used had been no ordinary flashbang. The thick scent of magic lingered on the scene, and it seemed like they'd used *space-bending* magic in the form of some enchanted tool or catalyst. I couldn't even begin to imagine how expensive that would be—even as a consumable, it could go for tens of thousands of drachmae and still find buyers.

"And they managed to pick up after themselves too. Argh, this is gonna make tracking them down so much harder."

Had they left a body part or two, we could've used it to pin down their location and air out any further grievances. As it stood, though, the blood spilt on the ground wasn't quite enough.

Man, I've got a bad taste in my mouth. What a sorry way to cap off a great fight. It wasn't that I'd wanted to kill them, but that this felt too inconclusive to satisfy me. And sure, I could celebrate the fact that I'd come out unscathed, but as a frail little mensch, this was about the only way I could ever win anyway. Had any spectators been present, they would surely boo the episode as a boring spat with an abrupt ending.

*Oh well. I guess I'll go join up with Lady Agrippina and—*suddenly, the small pouch at my waist shivered. It was the little pocket I kept Ursula's never-wilting rose in.

On a night much like this one, where the False Moon hid out of sight, she'd once wrung out what little power she could muster to tremble in the same way: it was when I'd first stepped into the sea of trees leading toward the ichor maze. Had I heeded her warning then, Mika and I wouldn't have ended up knocking on death's door.

So I'm not going to the main hall, I guess?

I'd failed to take notice of her signals once and gotten burnt for it; daring to do so again could put me at serious risk of being spirited away to the twilight hill. It was probably best to listen. Walking away from the manor, I decided to try contacting Lady Agrippina with a spell instead...only for an explosion at my back to send me *flying*.

[Tips] Corpses represent a great deal of information that may fall into enemy hands. Survival—or at least, retrieval of the dead—is a top priority for assassins and secret agents, second only to

the success of a mission itself.

Smoke with the scent of sweet fruit blanketed a pair of methuselah. By the time the last of her leaves had burnt to ashes and the final drop of his wine had been lapped away, their conversation had naturally drifted to newer topics.

“Now then, Agrippina. Wit have a gift for you.”

“A gift, you say?”

“Indeed. It would please me greatly if you’d accept it.”

The marquis reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small and classy box. Coated on the outside with crimson felt, he popped the lid open to show a single ring hidden within. It was a mystarille band capped with an emerald larger than the tip of his thumb. Smaragds, as the jewel was commonly known in the Empire, were certainly popular as gemstones; though, in recent years, it was more in vogue to send them to others with a certain mystic meaning in mind.

Emeralds were said to ward off poison and defend virtue in the face of temptation. As such, there could only be one interpretation for a man giving a woman such a jewel: a proposal.

“I see your material never gets any better. Did a lowborn minstrel inspire this little idea of yours?”

“No, no, Wit am serious, Agrippina. Don’t you think it sounds wonderful? Count Agrippina Voisin von Ubiorum—otherwise known as Marchioness Agrippina Voisin von Donnersmarck. Wit simply thinks it has a marvelous ring to it.”

“I’m afraid I disagree entirely. In fact, I’ve heard tone-deaf bards drunkenly stumble through hackneyed tunes that were less grating on the ears. Besides...”

Agrippina plucked the ring out of the box and held it up toward the light, eyeing it over without a hint of interest. It was well made: the mystarille was properly fashioned, the gemstone had been sanded down into an intricate shape with great care and skill, and the design was a traditional mainstay that would never grow old no matter how many years ticked by.

Alas, she simply didn’t like it.

“The design is old and in poor taste. This ring would be best fit adorning the finger of some country bumpkin—or perhaps you ought to play the part of a dutiful son and send it to your mother.”

“Oh, how cruel of you, Agrippina—how cruel. And here Wit had imagined a gleaming emerald might fit the beautiful hue of your eye.”

“My, is this eye of mine to your liking? It seems you do have *some* good sense.”

Though their good-natured expressions did not fade, the air between them creaked under the tension—literally. Trace amounts of

the mana swirling within their bodies leaked into the room, warping it; the mystic lamps flickered and stray shards from the broken flowerpot shattered further.

“But I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. May I ask you to come again at a later date with a better engagement speech? And I must say, this isn’t exactly the most romantic of situations. Proposing in a cramped tearoom with the deathly stink of a dead orc fouling up the air is sure to cause even passions stoked for a century to fizzle out into cinders.”

“Wit ask not for passions to last a century, Agrippina, but for love to endure a millennium. Take my hand, and we can lay claim to vast swaths of the Empire—fifty years, and an electorate seat may be in reach. If all goes well, we could have legal ties of relation to the throne.”

“Is that so? But tell me: where in this happy future of ours am I taken out of the picture?”

Their dashing smiles oozed with toxicity. With his ostensible “flirtations” failing to land, Marquis Donnersmarck shook his head.

“My proposal was made out of concern for *you*. It is no exaggeration to say that the majority of noble households in the county are under my sphere of influence. Should you push forward alone, who knows how many will turn coat and cease to be of use?”

“I never expected anything to begin with. His Majesty has personally vested me with the authority to cut up the region as I see fit, and truthfully, such a revolt may be my easiest path forward. I hear the young Graufrocks are just *itching* for a fight, and I’m sure they’d be more than happy to make the hike over.”

“...But then the county will slip out of your fingers. With so many notable names involved, it would become impossible to rule as you please. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“Since when has that *ever* been my goal?” Disappearing the pipe from her hands, Agrippina peeled off the last layer of her facade and propped up her chin. As indescribably showy as ever, her everyday sneer was on full display. “Frankly put, the fate which befalls this territory couldn’t possibly interest me less, so long as it doesn’t cause me any issues. Whether two hundred people die in this very manor or all 250 thousand citizens of the county perish, it isn’t my concern.”

“Agrippina, you don’t mean—”

“Marquis Donnersmarck, you have made a *terrible* miscalculation. Power? Politics? I simply *don’t care*. You see, the only thing I want out of life is to see all the stories it has to offer: all the long-lost chronicles of the past, every saga taking shape at this very moment, the sum of history yet unwritten, stretching out to the ends of eternity.”

As excitement took hold of her, Agrippina’s jade eye began to melt. The definite bounds of her black pupil grew hazy as a whirlpool

of color swirled into the center; though Marquis Donnersmarck had crossed paths with countless arcane oddities in his time—many of them effectively mystic embodiments of malice—even he shivered when he locked eyes with her.

“So allow me to answer your proposal without any affectation, Marquis.”

“...Please do. Wit do hope for an agreeable answer. We can do so much together. A splendid future for both of us lies ahead.”

While he remained a picture-perfect gentleman on the surface, the marquis couldn't keep his cool inside—especially when the count suddenly grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close. Face-to-face, her eyes nearly touched his own. A single bead of sweat formed on his forehead, and it finally sank in.

These eyes—no, this woman...

“Stand in my way, and you will die, imbecile.”

...is mad.

Annihilation swallowed them whole: neither heat nor light accompanied the raw burst of magical power that erupted at their feet, erasing everything it came across as the blast devoured the building.

Marquis Donnersmarck kept a handful of magia in his orbit, and had instructed them to prepare a Great Work of polemurgy in the basement of the manor that could be activated with a remote incantation. In the event that his attempt to win over the count went awry, his failsafe had been to simply obliterate the entire estate.

Naturally, he had an excuse as well. Viscount Liplar had recently purchased a dragon egg, you see—not an egg bred from one of the domesticated line of drakes that were kept in Rhine, of course, but one belonging to a *true* dragon. Enraged, the parent had followed it here and exacted its vengeance.

Without cameras or telecommunications, the cover-up was perfectly doable. Originally, his story had included an emergency of statecraft that the viscount would have been out of the house to settle, allowing for all eyewitnesses to be eliminated but him. By the time anyone from the College made their way out to investigate, the traces of mana would have dissipated; lacking any other survivor testimony, the inconvenient truth could be swept under the rug of a draconic calamity.

“Ergh... Not even she could survive that, Wit take it?”

The man magically floating midair had only made it through the ceremonial spell of destruction thanks to the arsenal of enchanted gear he carried on his person. Casting his gaze over the rubble that had once been a house, he mumbled to himself in awe; being in the blast radius hadn't been part of his plans, but any later and he was

convinced he would've died.

Although the viscount had broken the voice tube, it had still served as a tiny hole in the antithaumaturgic barrier surrounding the tearoom. Sending a signal through it, the marquis had ordered that the Liplar house be vaporized alongside its guards, knights, and servants; still, the smoldering ruins retained enough shape to be recognizable.

A midnight breeze rolled through, whisking away the smoke...and there she was, standing without a care in the world. Her lavishly set hair retained its perfect form; her scarlet dress remained untainted by even a single speck of dust.

Despite finding herself at ground zero, the lady carried herself as though the explosion hadn't affected her in any way—and in truth, it hadn't. After all, she'd been somewhere else the instant things went off.

“Ha...ha! Are you some sort of immortal, Agrippina?”

“Oh please, I'll die if you kill me. This is simply a matter of your efforts falling short. No matter how mighty the spell, it means nothing if it can't reach my sanctuary, a dimension removed.”

Sensing that an arcane attack was imminent, Agrippina had bent space to slip into a separate layer of existence. The rest was a simple affair: after waiting out the few seconds it would take for the explosion to settle, she'd popped back into her original position. Yet the remarkable speed with which she'd navigated the intricacies of space-bending was beyond even the marquis's wildest imagination.

“Ah, of course... A mistake on my part. Wit shouldn't have let my preconceptions of possible and impossible cloud my judgment; perhaps a powerful counterspell was in order.”

“Though in that case, I doubt you would've been able to rely upon your own mystic defenses. Well then, with that out of the way, how do you intend to entertain me next? I'll have you know that I'm not very keen on boring gentlemen.”

“Agrippina, you truly are a wonderful woman. Your every word and action makes me want you all the more—but you would be better dead than alive.”

Still, now that she'd revealed her hand, he could simply jam her magic. Returning to the scene instead of making her getaway was her biggest mistake. Even if she'd come equipped with her staff, ready for a proper fight, Marquis Donnersmarck had prepared a backup plan in the event that the Great Work failed to trigger: his forces marched out of the woodwork to surround her.

“Oh, that's it? How tasteless. This is a cliché that belongs in the tepid productions of a public theater.”

Since the ritual's range had only encompassed the manor proper,

his subordinates whom he'd placed just outside were perfectly fine. Dozens upon dozens of sepa crawled out, clad in shadowy robes, each an expert mage, marksman, or knight in their own right.

Welcomed in by the late Viscount Liplar, the marquis's personal army was on the scene. With their skills, any attempt to teleport away would be blocked by the mages, allowing the rest to overwhelm her with sheer violence; a magus afforded no time to focus on spellcasting was no better than a regular person.

"This is my last offer, Agrippina. No matter how powerful a magus you are, *this* is not a situation you can overcome alone without so much as a vanguard to protect you. Sign, and you shall be spared."

The man tossed a loose sheet of paper toward her. Imbued with a mystically binding contract which wrought death in the event of a breach, the document served as an absolute oath. Upon reading through a marriage form utterly devoid of romance, Agrippina scoffed and burned the parchment to a crisp.

"A boring man remains boring to the end—not even pub drunkards could hope to be so humorless. Oh, and let me ask you one last thing." Gently, her hand rose to pinch the ever-present monocle adorning her left eye. "When did I ever give you permission to speak my name?"

"A true shame. Goodbye, Agrippina."

The marquis's farewell marked the beginning of an unbridled bombardment. Standard offensive magicks like waves of flame or frigid gales were interspersed with airborne blight that spelled death at first breath; in conjunction, a hail of arrows and arcane grenades rained down on her.

While their allies laid down a battery that would topple the most fortified outpost of knights, the melee forces began to advance. As they did, the back line shifted gears, opting for attacks that limited the enemy's range of movement. The merciless fusillade began to let up, and the vanguard advanced into the cloud of dust that had arisen from the barrage.

They crossed the boundary of their enemy's defensive barrier into a bubble of space free of smoke...only to be met with a ruthless storm of claws and fangs that rent them into mincemeat.

"What?!"

Screams flooded out from within the fog, heralding the brutal massacre of the marquis's peerless soldiers. Bloody mist tinted the air, and though those at range laid down their best covering fire, the echoing throes of death went unabated. Recognizing that they had no hope of saving their friends, the mages began to dish out large-scale destructive spells, but to no avail.

Having finished feasting on those audacious enough to approach

it, the vicious *thing* turned its attention outward in search of its next mark.

“What the hell is *this*?!”

Marquis Donnersmarck had no idea what this beast now gnawing on his physical barrier even was. Here was a man who’d lived for centuries, accumulating a vast wealth of knowledge and experience, who’d written and sung many a poem—yet not even he could muster the words to describe it.

Perhaps the closest description would be to say that it was a blue-black, amorphous haze of mud. It oozed like the viscous goop of a rotting, festering brain, but boasted countless mismatched sets of claws and fangs that appeared and disappeared at random. Scattering fetid pus as it rampaged, it zipped about, howling ravenously.

Steered by insatiable instinct, the living curse summoned talons and teeth from thin air in a desperate attempt to sate its urges. Where catapult fire would have bounced right off the marquis’s force field, this beast had cracked it open; talisman after talisman, ring after ring, his defenses shattered as it made its way through the layers.

Although the squadron of mages fired off spells to save their lord, nothing worked. Or rather, it wasn’t that their attempts had no effect; the viscous mud was taking the form of a starving, skin-and-bones canid for seconds at a time to *eat* their spells.

Realizing that a monster capable of wolfing down magical phenomena and the concepts his barriers were built with was nearly upon him, Marquis Donnersmarck swiftly changed the orientation of his arcane shields: the bubble he’d been using to protect himself became a cage to lock in the beast. Stuck on the inside of a perfect sphere, the creature lost the surface it had sunk its teeth into and plummeted to earth. Even so, it showed no signs of injury and resumed wrecking the layers of its new enclosure.

“Wh-What is that?! What the hell is that thing?!”

“That would be my hound, Marquis Donnersmarck.”



“Wah!” Whirling around in surprise, the man saw a well-to-do lady standing on thin air. She didn’t bother attacking; wearing a listless air about her, she lazily pulled out her pipe and began smoking once more.

The marquis glared at her and the sickly sweet fragrance she exhaled, only to notice something: the left eye that he had eulogized was closed, a streak of blood streaming from it. A hazy mist leaked from the crack of her eyelid, leaving a faint—yet definite—trail that connected her to the amorphous beast like an umbilical cord of murky jade.

“Wh-What—you—what have you done?! What have you unleashed upon the world?!”

“Truth be told, I’m not entirely sure myself. What I do know, however, is that I chanced upon a cursed land engulfed by ichor a short while before arriving in the Empire—and it was there that I made contact with a distortion in time.”

Not a soul in the Empire knew this secret, but Agrippina’s heterochromia was not a born condition. The eyes her parents had gifted her had both been a deep, enchanting blue.

“It was such a magnificent twist of fate. I’d gotten a glimpse of the secrets of time, the meaning of reality, the flow of existence, and the essence of magecraft... I was so overcome with gratitude that I even offered my thanks to the gods. So very unlike me, I know, but the episode showed me what I want most in life—and how to attain it.”

But of the two deep sapphires she had been born with, she had lost one on the day that she peered into the broken abyss where the laws of time lay buried.

“Alas, you see, it seems that even the most beautiful of life’s gifts come at a cost. A gorgeous art gallery charges fees for entry; the seats to a thrilling drama must be purchased; even the stunning view from atop a hill demands payment in the form of the effort to climb it.”

The beast, too dreadful to depict in words, broke free from its invisible prison after no more than ten seconds; immediately, it lunged for the closest target. One knight who’d been fortunate enough to survive the melee in the smoke now found themselves swept up in a muddy torrent of fangs that shredded armor and flesh alike. Another drew nearer in an attempt to save the first, but was instantly bisected lengthwise and, as expected, eaten.

The thing had no scruples: not in regard to what it killed nor what it ate. Hunger was its solitary logic. The sin of observation was cause enough to attack, and worldly notions of justice and evil had no bearing on it—after all, the wisdom and virtues of man meant nothing in the face of otherworldly law.

“I imagine that the ordinary price of discovering Truth is one’s life. And I must admit, I struggled to fend off that beast when it came for me—never would I have imagined losing a whole eye.”

By some stroke of incredible coincidence, a young Agrippina had stumbled upon her calling in life and the means to see it through. Yet it came with a steep cost: physically nebulous and infinitely starving, a creature fashioned of cosmic filth had been unleashed to hunt her down.

Although she only barely managed to keep it at bay, the joy of survival had not been enough for the adolescent methuselah. Something about the defeated beast intrigued her: *What truths might I uncover if I see the world through its eyes?*

“So, naturally, I reclaimed what had been taken from me.”

“Th-Then that eye—your missing eye! That link... Don’t tell me—”

“All is as you imagine: half of my vision is filtered through *that*.”

Agrippina grinned from ear to ear and wove a magic formula into the smoke of her pipe. Matters of existence and nonexistence as they pertained to the physical realm were her specialty, and she had summoned a massive sphere of nihility. The black hole was oblivion: a single touch was all it needed to jettison anyone or anything to the furthest reaches of reality.

Marquis Donnersmarck instantly recognized the destruction the black ball could bring. Falling back, he began preparing his own mystic attack: a *thunderbolt*. Command of lightning, crackling in from the heavens above, was a privilege of the gods; a normal mage could hardly activate such a spell, let alone control it. Concentrating heat that surpassed the stars in the sky into a single point, it split the air in two to eradicate anything in its path. But above all else, it crashed down at speeds that left its own sound in the dust, making it completely impossible to avoid.

Impossible, indeed.

Arcs of lightning snaked toward Agrippina, trapping her in a coiling static web, but it was no use. The black orb swallowed all of them whole. Not a single one landed: not the bolts that had fanned out just before impact; nor those that split into two and then regrouped later on; nor even the ones that the marquis had fired at random to make sure not even *he* could read their trajectory.

It was as if she had known exactly where they would be.

“That’s preposterous! That’s infeasible! For a *mortal*?! Methuselah or not, no mind can bear such burdens!”

“Anything is possible if you set your mind to it, Marquis. Like so.”

Nonchalantly making her way through the chaotic thunderstorm, Agrippina exhaled another cloud of smoke. Propelled by a basic formula, it drifted over to the marquis’s side and then rearranged itself

into a greater spell.

“Gragh?!”

The moment it was put together, the puff had become a counterspell, perfectly jamming his attack and causing it to backfire spectacularly. The blast sent his lithe frame flying, and he plunged toward the ground. Aftershocks from his own spell burnt his face, branding his cheeks with arcing electricity.

“Oh, you poor thing. I *do* hope your eyes are still intact.”

“Eep!”

As the long-forgotten sensation of visceral pain gripped the ascendant organism, he looked up to find Agrippina lording over him with a pitying expression as if her presence was perfectly natural. But even with space-bending magic, she shouldn’t have been here this quickly.

“Y-You madwoman—no! It can’t be!”

“Aww, not going to call my name? And here I’d thought we were close.”

“You...can see...the *future*?”

Agrippina neither affirmed nor denied—she only laughed. Yet that was the most unambiguous answer she could have given: she could, and did. Her foresight extended mere seconds into the unknown at most, and was by no means an absolute prediction, but she could *see the future*.

For now, her ability only offered a shortsighted vision of events that were liable to be overridden in the presence of improbable fluctuations; even for this imperfect power, usage imposed massive tolls on her body and mind. Yet in spite of the drawbacks, she had transcended beyond the bounds laid out for mortal souls.

Wit can’t win. Internalizing the futility of resistance, Marquis Donnersmarck bit hard into his lip in frustration.

This was a charade. No matter how meticulous his strategy, no matter how exhaustive his attack, he had no hope of beating a magus of her strength if she knew his next move. How could he hope to win a hand at the table if his cards were out for her to see? All she had to do was wait and pick the right counter to anything he tried to do.

Victory was unattainable. For the first time in his life, the marquis found himself drowning in a sea of despair. Until now, he’d swum through the currents of politics and won, and won, and kept winning—even when he didn’t win, he *never* lost. But out on the open oceans, he was no more than a bigger fish’s meal, and that realization crushed his soul.

“Shouldn’t you be doing something?” Agrippina said. “A good number of them are gone, but these are your little favorites, aren’t they?”

Alas, there was no time to wallow in grief. The starving dog tore through more of his prized forces with every passing second. He'd spent a great deal of time and care bringing them up, and the assassins in particular were irreplaceable. Unlike Viscount Liplar, he hadn't merely bought these soldiers with a mountain of silver. In all likelihood, the forces he'd sent to the annex in case the viscount's men failed had also been routed; he couldn't afford to lose anyone else.

Though Marquis Donnersmarck viewed people as pawns, he was deeply fond of his pieces.

"Wh-What do you want?! What do you need from me to make you stop that thing?!"

"I don't *need* anything, really. I won't even demand that you cease your meddling in the county. After all, I can deal with a man of your talents whenever I please. But you know, aren't you forgetting something important?" Outranked but not outclassed, the count looked down on the marquis groveling on the floor. Curling her pretty lips into a sweet little smile, she hissed, "Where's my 'please'?"

Her words gave form to his humiliation. The statement was a partisan declaration of their standings that didn't bother to ask for a second opinion, but he had no right to object.

To choose pride was death. Unlike Agrippina, he had no means of handling the beast, and thus couldn't save his subordinates. While he alone could escape if he used the rest of his enchanted treasures, losing all of the sepa would be worse than cutting off his left hand.

"Wit... Hngh..." There was a faint *squish*: he'd bitten straight through his lip. A streak of blood running down his chin, he finally squeezed out, "*Please*."

The marquis had wrung out the word like it represented the collapse of everything he'd ever known; in contrast, Agrippina scoffed lightly like she'd heard a tiresome joke.

"Very well."

With a snap, she sectioned off a chunk of reality. The black sphere that had been revolving around her split into six and surrounded the rampaging blue-black blur. Outlining a spatial rift shaped like an eight-sided die, they trapped the monster inside. For all its ferocious flailing, it had no means of escape; not even the claws of twisted time could penetrate the boundaries that separated this dimension from the next.

"Take those who are still breathing and run along while you have the chance," Agrippina said. "Worry not, I shan't give chase. Besides, it truly is a shame that Viscount Liplar would cause such pandemonium in a desperate fit of insanity. Isn't that right?"

"...Wit have never understood the hearts of those who bent the knee before me, walking away with one last resentful comment. But

Wit understand perfectly now, *Count Ubiorum*.”

Though his dignity was shattered, his schemes thwarted, and his losses great, the man dusted himself off and stood up like a proper noble. The shock still echoed loudly in his soul, but there was much to be done. Making up for what had been lost should by all means have been the first priority, but...

“Remember this. Wit shall make you rue the day you let me walk free.”

...it was too late for him to abandon the machinations that gave his life meaning.

“I shall await you with bated breath. The only reason you’re alive is because things are easier for me this way, but I’m always looking forward to a thrilling and unexpected twist.”

After watching the marquis limp off—it seemed he’d injured a leg during his fall—Agrippina turned to the spatial cage. Not content to give up, the beast within growled, snarled, and lashed against the inside of its confines. She watched it struggle for a bit, but eventually sighed and mumbled, “You never do get any friendlier, do you?”

Snapping her fingers, she commanded, “*Sit*.”

The vertices of hollow space rapidly converged toward the center, compressing their prisoner into a single point. Making a disgusting noise, the barrier crushed the otherworldly dog; but as the black orbs finally disappeared into a dense speck, they left an eyeball in their place.

Agrippina picked it up, blew off the dust, and popped it into her hollow socket without the faintest hint of ceremony. A few blinks later, she was satisfied with how it sat; she wiped the blood off her face and brought her monocle back out, placing it where it belonged.

After all of that, a stray thought crossed her mind.

Speaking of dogs, I wonder where that golden hound of mine has gone.

[Tips] Agrippina’s hound is a class of extradimensional creature that comes from a place where impossible physics are the norm. Its purpose is to hunt down all who dare perceive the tangled flow of broken time, and permanently hungers to that end. Although its form is a nebulous smattering of tainted, bluish-greenish goop, it vaguely resembles a canine when taken at its broadest strokes; as such, Agrippina refers to it as her pet hunting dog.

While it is perfectly possible that the denizens of other dimensions have different names for it, only the highest strata of gods—those who preside over the infinite expanse of multiversal space—would know it.

Postface

Ending

A conversation spoken in blades will no doubt bring much ruin; yet destruction is at times the fertile bed from which new connections blossom. Whether the relationship is that of mortal enemies or something less easily put to words is for fate to decide.

Facing the rising sun, I looked out at the mountain of rubble, popped the cork out of an expensive-looking wine bottle, and got to chugging.

The situation *demand*ed a drink, okay?

The sudden shock wave had sent me straight into the annex wall, knocking me out cold. Only awoken by the Craving Blade's piercing wails, I opened my eyes to see some kind of terrible monster painting the place with blood.

Obviously, I ran. I refused to spend even one second in the presence of a Ragnarok-worthy monstrosity. I'd put in my hours as an Investigator, and freaks of supernature like that had left me with nothing but trauma. In this case, I hadn't even accidentally peered into a mirror that let me see the future or whatever, so I was *not* letting myself become a victim of collateral damage.

I fled the scene in a rush, though I made sure to pick up Schutzwolfe before I did—the Craving Blade could find her own way to me, so I left her there. Once I was out of range of any stray projectiles, I decided to run over to the stables: I couldn't predict what might happen next and wanted to make sure the Dioscuri were safe. There, I began to feel sorry for the other horses. Letting them get swept up in our human struggles was too much; I decided to free them all, leading them up to this removed hill overlooking the manor.

I'd come across a storehouse on my way out, and swiped the wine from there. Despite my dehydration from the long skirmish, I'd made my escape without stopping for any of my luggage. Eager for something to quench my thirst, I'd figured I deserved this much with all the shit I'd gone through.

In any case, the signs of battle had faded for quite some time, and I began wondering what had happened to Lady Agrippina. I hadn't seen anyone else this whole while, so I was confident she hadn't lost: had the viscount or marquis come out on top, things wouldn't be so

quiet. Although there were some Liplar guards and citizens gathered near the front gate, the knights stationed around the premises were surely on strict orders not to let anyone in.

Hrm, what to do... Should I go look for the madam? But there's a chance that beast is still lingering around, so I don't really want to...

Knowing I wouldn't stand a chance against that thing, I was of the opinion that not pushing myself was for the best. Besides, I didn't exactly have the courage to willingly challenge a foe when it could shrug off attacks just because they were based in physical reality.

As my mind wandered and my hand reached for a second bottle, I saw a shadow stir near the mansion. Though it was too far to make out in detail, the outline was definitely person-shaped.

Until now, I'd refrained from using Farsight out of fear that I might catch the monster's attention; a person, however, was fair game. If someone was still alive down there, then the creature must have been subjugated. Upon extending my vision, I saw—as expected—one Lady Agrippina in sound condition.

Uh-oh, she noticed me. My spell had evidently given me away, because she was looking straight at it and motioning with her finger for me to come.

Hurrying onto Castor with Polydeukes in tow, I made my way over. I arrived to find my boss in a terrible mood, smelling thickly of sweet smoke.

“Uh... I am most pleased to see your safe return, my liege.”

“Is that so? I'm pleased myself to see how blessed I am with help: you certainly seemed to be enjoying a nice break for yourself from afar.”

“I had my own problems to deal with, okay?!”

The madam was one puffed cheek away from a full-on pout, but I *had* to put in an objection. Ignoring me, she took a seat on a nearby bit of rubble and held out her hand.

“I'm *thirsty*.”

“Erp—yes, ma'am.”

How very keen of her to spot the bottle of wine still nestled into Castor's saddle pouch. Taking it in hand, she spent a moment reading the label and eventually decided it was good enough to put up with. She popped the cork off with an offhand spell and drank straight from the bottle, just as I had with the first.

“Terrible maintenance. All the flavor is gone.”

“By the way,” I piped up, “I can see that you're safe and sound, but what have you been doing all this time? The fighting stopped quite a while back.”

“Hm? I was collecting intelligence and doing a touch of groundwork. That, and tonight has been rather exhausting, so I've

been smoking to recover the mana I spent.”

You?! Tired?!

The uncharacteristic claim caught me off guard, but it seemed last night’s brawl had been an ordeal great enough to drain even the madam; that freakish monster must have been the root of her fatigue. She herself claimed to be killable, so tiring out every once in a while seemed plausible. Probably. Okay, *maybe*.

“So what do you plan on doing next?” I asked.

“Hm? Ah, let me see... First, we shall head to Kolnia, where we will dispatch a messenger to the palace to sort this incident out. Goodness, there’s an awful lot to do. Oh, but quelling the chaos here comes first—I’ll need to stop by the city’s main office.”

Yeah, I imagine you’d be busy. After all, the manor didn’t look like a very hospitable spot to find survivors in, and this chaos would leave the viscount’s seat vacant. I wondered how she was going to deal with that.

“Say, Erich. I’ve just had a passing thought.”

“What might that be?”

“Instead of leaving next year, how about I ordain you as my personal knight?”

“Excuse me?! ”

What the hell was this witch saying? Why were all her ideas so overblown and ridiculous?

“My problems are only going to grow more numerous, and I’m not sure I’ll ever stumble across another retainer as useful as you.”

“I understand, but that isn’t something to offer so casually.”

“But I really do want you around going forward. Won’t you stay? Spend a few more years with me, and I would be happy to adopt you so that you can inherit the Ubiorum title. Act now, and I’ll even set aside the Liplar viscounty for free!”

I see your endgame.

And of course she’d try: being Count Ubiorum was nothing but trouble for her, but it was too great a responsibility to haphazardly toss aside. Now that she’d gotten a bitter, firsthand taste of the burden she’d been saddled with, her first thought had been to conjure up ways to legally off-load her position. I was just the closest sacrifice in reach.

Mhmm, yup. I get it. I really do...but you aren’t the only one who’s sick of this.

Sporting the brightest smile I’d ever had in all my life, I gave my answer: “Not a chance in hell.”

[Tips] Commoners can be ennobled if they accomplish tremendous feats for the Empire. In this particular case, a boy

who has assisted in righting the course of a county time and time again, contributing greatly to its continued peace, can easily be adopted to honor his achievements. From there, inheriting the title would be a matter of course.

Otherwise—though this is a serious stretch—one could attempt to win a title by insisting that they descend from noble blood unbeknownst to the public record.

Having long resisted the call to give up their snowy mantles, a lofty range of mountains was finally letting their outer coats melt away. Nestled among them was one of the leading recuperation facilities in the Empire, and in it, a small cabin.

This was the home of a College professor who, in spite of their qualifications as an iatruge, had grown tired of the less than peaceful cases he'd been saddled with in the palace. Having retreated to live a more hermetic life, he was retired from his official position in all but name.

Being located directly on a hot-spring resort for the gentry, the clinic's clientele naturally came with very mundane issues. Nobles strained by the bureaucratic system came to him with stiff shoulders or back pain more intimate than a spouse, and some—though very quietly—stopped by to get help with embarrassing matters such as hemorrhoids.

Alas, every now and again, a nuisance came along.

Yet the iatruge did not deny them—nay, he couldn't. Receding from the tedium that bubbled at the heart of the Empire was not as simple as throwing up one's hands and shouting, "I'm done!" and the doctor's successful escape had been the product of a powerful backer. Duty demanded he treat injuries suffered in the shady power struggles he had so loathed, and the state-supervised art of limb regeneration was just another item on the menu.

Sectioned off in a personal room, one patient slowly unwrapped the bandages covering her arms. The intricate formulae woven on made them look like never-ending talismans, but at last they fell away to unveil a restored surface of olive skin.

Gentle rays of sun filtered through the window and onto her arms. Cautiously, oh so gingerly, she wiggled her fingers. Though a touch of numbness and a light funniness of feeling remained, her calloused digits moved to her whim.

One by one, she carefully bent them down until they formed a fist. After confirming that, she went on to test a few more shapes. Satisfied with the movement of her hand, she reached to touch her own arm and was shocked: she could feel.

The sensation in her arm was stifled, as though a thin layer of

cloth were impeding the contact of her fingertips; yet when she pressed harder, she could certainly feel that her arm was being held. Gliding up her arms, she at last came to the scar: a ring of lightened skin left a trail all the way around the circumference like a crawling worm—on her left arm and both of her upper ones.

Of her two sets of two, she had lost more than half. But despite being completely severed, the iatrurge had managed to put them back with a literally reality-defying level of skill. Her bones, arteries, and even nerves were exactly as they had been. While she would need some time to accustom herself to the oddities in sensation, disciplined practice would solve that issue. In fact, the doctor had noted that the precision of the cuts had left her arms in good condition; she would be back to full health sooner than most.

“Does it feel right? Oh, thank goodness you can move.”

A voice interrupted the patient’s thorough self-examination. The speaker had been waiting silently in the corner of the room for her to finish unbinding her arms, but now he reached out. As his fingers traced the painful tracks of discolored skin, he bit his lip—surely a shocking display of emotion for those who only knew his genial smile.

Who could ever expect to see Marquis Donnersmarck, of all people, let his bitter feelings show? And in the presence of a mere sepa girl, hailing from a people unrepresented in imperial high society, at that.

“Oh, my darling Nakeisha. Wit couldn’t so much as sleep for the fear that your arms might not heal.”

“My sincerest apologies for worrying you, Marquis Donnersmarck.”

“Don’t apologize. Please, Nakeisha, it’s fine. More importantly, there isn’t anyone else here. Won’t you please—”

As he nuzzled his forehead against her hand, the man was cut off by a knock at the door. He answered, somewhat irritably, and was met with the voice of his elderly retainer.

“Marquis, as thorough as our counterintelligence may be, I bid you to take more care in your remarks.”

An old sepa walked in carrying a tray with hot water and tea leaves. His limbs, like Nakeisha’s, were completely sheathed in enchanted dressing; though his head was uncovered, the horrific burns on display were enough to make an onlooker wince. All of his graying hair had been shaved off, leaving only battle scars too deep for iatrurgy to eliminate. Upon closer inspection, his stern amethyst eyes were gone, replaced with the showy yellow of arcane implants.

Though his scars would eventually fade with proper treatment and his eyes would regain their original luster with time, seeing him as he was now induced secondhand pain. Yet the marquis’s expression upon

turning to him was closer to a pout.

“Don’t be so petty, Rashid. Everyone knows. They know *our* relationship too, O Father-in-Law. If Wit can’t relax at a remote hot spring, then where will Wit ever?”

“You have nothing but my gratitude for the love you have shown my daughter, and her daughter after her. But our clan has an image and honor to uphold. So long as this resort is publicly open to guests, I must ask that you show prudence in restraint.”

“What a nagging old man you are—is this what age does to a person? Wit should hope Wit never turn out this way.”

“If I’m not mistaken, Marquis—are you not centuries my senior?”

The old sepa’s face scrunched into a frown, but the methuselah brazenly waved him off, commenting that he could pass for the man’s grandson. Perhaps the irony was most palpable when considering that not only was the methuselah older, but he’d sponsored this clan since they first arrived in the Empire.

The sepa whom Marquis Donnersmarck so prized as his best agents could trace their lineage back to a line of retainers once tasked with serving royalty of the Southern Continent. At the end of a long struggle for the throne, the new king had held reservations about keeping around a clan of spies who’d failed to protect their own monarch; resolving to leave before they could be forcibly removed, the sepa had abandoned their homeland in search of a new one.

Eventually, their journey had led them to the Trialist Empire, whereupon they found themselves at the behest of a then-young Marquis Donnersmarck. Through the twists and turns of fate, the methuselah had helped restore them to their glory, and now they served him—not in any officially recognized capacity, of course—as his most trusted retainers.

The depths of his love were perhaps best seen in the treatment of his mistress: a sepa agent he’d fallen for. He fawned on her as lavishly as any other would a lawful wife, and she enjoyed a life of safety and luxury. Meanwhile, the pair’s daughter had received the thoroughest of educations, and was well on her way to becoming the next head of the clan.

“Marquis Donnersmarck.” Though she couldn’t call him as such, the girl cut into her father’s pointless argument with her grandfather with a question. “May I ask you for one selfish wish, as your daughter?”

A doting father to his core, the marquis excitedly answered that he would give her anything she wished for. Despite sending her on perilous missions in the name of rearing a strong successor to the clan, his affection for his daughter was indisputable.

This time, she’d suffered terrible injuries at his command, but he

couldn't justify rewarding her for an incomplete mission; he'd been hoping to make it up to her with a more personal request from the very start. After all, she hadn't been the only one to fail: this whole debacle could be traced back to his own error in calculation.

"You said before that I am free to choose with whom I bear my successor, yes?"

"Of course, my darling—Wit shall get you any man you please. Wit can't offer you the comfort of a lawful daughter, but that comes with freedom in marriage at the very least."

"In that case...I would like that servant of Count Ubiorum's."

"...*Huh?*"

Gasping in ignoble bewilderment, the marquis's jaw went slack. He understood the words she was saying. He knew whom she was referring to as well. But the blond tyke that the count kept on her person like a concealed dagger was the very target he'd tasked his daughter with killing. Having heard the reports of his skill and knowing the boy might have had a means of emergency communication, the marquis had sent an entire unit of his best men to assassinate the little beast; no matter how he twisted his mind, the methuselah simply couldn't understand why she'd choose that gremlin.

Paying her befuddled father no mind, the girl raised her three wounded arms and gazed at them with a longing sigh.

"I lost... I was decisively *beaten*, like I'd never been before. It was almost as if he was even holding back."



The girl's awestruck gaze remained fixed on the patchwork scars. Each slash had been fiery and intense, and yet cold and precise; she hadn't stood a chance. In all her training and work since coming into her own, this marked her first major injury—no, her first real *loss*.

When she closed her eyes, she could see it again in vivid detail: those sparkling blue eyes gleaming from within his helmet; his small frame, nimbly dancing about; the dreadful storm of swords, each threatening a fatal blow. They resurrected the chill in her spine and the long-forgotten, burning excitement that came with teetering on the edge of death. Even now, she could feel his bloodlust wash over him.

And the heat of battle resonating from her pounding heart burned on in the pit of her gut. Her reason had returned to her when the war-fires dimmed; she knew that this was a mere biological reaction. It was a warning system of sorts, built into every organism to incite the passing of genes when death approached.

Yet even so, even knowing that, even after telling herself it was but a trick of the mind, the flame of yearning would not go out.

One thought commanded her head: if she could sow the seed of his talent, what kind of ungodly monster would their child become? She didn't care whether they were mensch or sepa, boy or girl—so long as they were born healthy, she was sure they'd be a warrior like no other.

But if she had to choose, she would've liked for them to inherit those moonlit colors that clung to the core of her soul.

"One day, I should like to have my revenge and offer a toast with his skull. But at the same time, a part of me desires to hold that same head close, still attached to its neck. Do you understand?"

"Uh... Th-That is a very...nuanced set of emotions. How about it, Rashid? Can you elaborate on your granddaughter's feelings?"

"Please do not pass this matter to me. How can a grandfather hope to comprehend what the father cannot?"

As they watched their child's wistful gaze, the two men struggled to process her incomprehensible emotions. They were happy to let her experience love, but...that *thing*? And that her first awakening to love had come in such...instinctual ways was another point worthy of pause.

Alas, the girl cared not about her family's deep discomfort and hugged herself, covering each scar with a hand.

"I swear to grow strong enough that you will understand. When that day comes, I will go and make him bend his knee by my own hand. Father, please give me even greater challenges—I require more opportunities to polish my skills."

“...Very well. If that is what you want, Nakeisha, Wit will do my best to answer.”

“Besides, father,” she added, “you haven’t given up either, have you?”

Marquis Donnersmarck was genuinely surprised by his daughter’s comment. He had made no public comment, but it seemed like he was withdrawing from the county based on how he’d reassigned personnel; those working under him were all convinced the affair had put him off fighting for the Ubiorum name.

But his daughter knew the truth—she knew *him*: this seemingly friendly methuselah was the sorest loser in all the land. For the first time in ages, he had come across a player who could totally dismantle him and force checkmate; in no universe would he ever give up on her, and his daughter alone had understood that.

Although he would pull out of the territory for the time being, this was only a temporary maneuver to begin weaving a new web. This time it would be larger and sturdier, completely entangling her. He didn’t care that she had tamed the manifestation of violence itself as her pet; absolutes did not exist, and a perfect plan could very well ensnare her.

Now was the time to sleep on a bed of cold logs, lapping at his wounded pride so that he could conjure up yet greater schemes. He knew now that half measures carried along by inertia would not suffice to win the Ubiorum county. In that case, he would build up a grand conspiracy over the next few centuries, until his victory was a forgone conclusion.

“That’s right. Wit want to place a ring on that finger of hers like nothing else. Taming a foul and beautiful beast is a man’s truest joy.”

“...Is that why you raped mother?”

His daughter’s abrupt riposte caused the marquis to choke on his own spit, and for once, the sepa elder’s poker face crumbled.

Turning away from her father’s frenzied excuses, the young assassin clenched her fist.

When would they next meet? Though the golden wolf evaded her reach even in her daydreams, the girl let her mind wander to fantasies of their next encounter.

[Tips] Demihumans who trace their lineage back to aggressive insect species tend to prize strength above all else when selecting a suitable partner.

Two Full Hendersons

Ver0.2

2.0 Hendersons

The main story is irreparably busted.
The campaign ends.

The tale that follows is not from the time line we know—but it might have been, had the dice fallen differently...

Two Full Hendersons Ver0.2

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The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.

High society is a web reaching across classes and even factions. These “factions,” of course, are not the sorts of rigid cadres found within the College, nor are they official groups recognized by the Empire; more flexible and generalistic, they are closer to social cliques.

For example, take Baron A, a vassal of Count Whoever. If the count is a defender of the Emperor, he may follow his liege’s lead by publicly introducing himself as a resolute member of the monarch’s faction; however, his personal convictions can very well lead him to join Marquis B in a smaller circle dedicated to supporting the crown via economic policy. Further still, his responsibilities at home may give rise to connections with Baron C next door that morph into an alliance aiming to expedite progress in maritime trade.

Like the work of a sloppy engineer, the wires building up the Trialist Empire’s social web crisscross at every angle, and have long since calcified into permanent fixtures of the nation. Worse still, every coronation and every episode of familial drama adds to the confusion, mixing up the balance of power. They say even those on holiday must prepare a proxy to act in their stead, lest they be left hopelessly behind in three days’ time.

Seven centuries had passed since the Empire’s founding. The death of the sitting Emperor had put an Erstreich on the throne for the third time in recent years—though this was on a timescale of centuries—heralding in yet another major shift in political equilibrium. Yet amidst the chaos, one electorate marquis was hosting a grand ball.

The guards manning the stately double doors announced the entrance of a new pair of guests in sonorous baritone. At once, the elegant dance tunes and genteel smiles gave way to an air of excitement. But this wasn’t because the new arrivals were particularly notable—or at least, not wholly. It was that the great fortune and authority they commanded made their presence, in and of itself, a major political statement.

To grace an evening banquet was a display of interest, if not outright friendship; a connection between two factional leaders could

turn a working alliance into a deep mutual bond. As such, the count's presence tonight was a surprise to both their fellow guests and the *host*, who'd sent the invitation out of obligation and never expected it to be accepted.

But the count had no doubt come in search of exactly this commotion. Even the most hushed rumor could hold enough weight to tip the balance of power, after all. A set of splendiferous double doors fit to adorn a castle slowly cracked open, revealing the count—or rather, the count and countess.

"Goodness, they're as beautiful as ever."

"Indeed. Look at how positively in love they are!"

"You said you attended their wedding, didn't you? Have they always been this way?"

"Oh, they haven't changed a bit."

Leisurely striding across the carpet, the couple made their way toward the depths of the room, where the host was sizing up his guests. Their mere presence—the mere act of *walking*—was enough to send murmurous waves throughout the room of aristocrats; this was what true influence looked like.

Gracefully linked at the arms, the pair's smiles never faltered in the face of this torrential downpour of gossip. Their lips curled gently, as if to say the partner at their side was the only happiness they could possibly need. So vivid was their undying love that their name had become synonymous with intimacy; in inaudible tones, the couple whispered into each other's ears.

"Hey, can't we go home? I'm already sick of this."

"Shut the fuck up. *You* were the one who said we had to come."

Nestling together and exchanging sweet nothings, they were the spitting image of an affectionate husband and wife. The barbs in their conversation passed unseen, and they strolled along at a mellow, comely pace to offer their respects to the host.

"But I must say, the depths of their devotion shocked even me." The fellow who'd been present for the couple's wedding ceremony sipped on his wine and reminisced. "Summoning a wraith, personality intact, from a soul long since put to rest is a ludicrous achievement, and doing so fueled by love alone is just marvelous to see."

Now then, let us tell the tale of the pair walking the red carpet.

This was a story of a husband and wife, of Erich and Agrippina. This perfectly normal couple were the two halves that made up Count and Countess Stahl, wed together in a perfectly normal marriage.

Alas, there was one difference between them: he was mortal, and she was not.

In a perfectly normal series of events, the mortal husband ran out of time and passed away. He was 106; a remarkable age for a mensch,

to be sure, but yet too tragic for the wife to consider remarriage. Any and every suitor was turned away with a wistful smile and the words, “I’m sorry. There is only one person I belong beside.”

Yet she was a stubborn woman. She wanted to see her late husband once more; she did everything she could to bring her dearest dream to fruition, even throwing around her weight as the foremost professor in the Leizniz cadre of Daybreak to advance her research.

At long last, forty years after the death of her husband, the wife managed to resurrect him as a wraith. Finally, their difference had been overcome: they were both immortal, ready to foster a love everlasting.

And so, the tragic tale of lost love ended with a happily ever after. Those who heard the story were awestruck by the sheer passion that overcame technical impossibility, and many tears were shed: who knew that true love could flourish so deeply in the callous realm of nonfiction?

But what the world didn’t know were the husband’s last words: “It’s finally over...”

[Tips] Wraithification is the rare process by which a powerful mage with deep-seated regrets may cling to this world at the time of death. Not only is the phenomenon infrequent and highly unpredictable, but academia is unsure if its current understanding of its necessary conditions is fully correct. As such, it was long considered impossible to artificially reproduce.

However, a joint thesis by Countess Agrippina du Stahl and one research partner was published in which a deceased person can be revived as a wraith under extremely specific circumstances. Despite its limitations, the paper caused a terrific commotion in arcane journalism.

“Aughhh, I’m sooo tired!”

Groaning like an old man getting out of a bath, the root of all the world’s evil threw herself onto the couch. The graceful beauty she’d worn just a few minutes ago had disappeared without a trace.

Who could ever believe that this slob, lazily pulling over a pitcher of water with an Unseen Hand and drinking straight from it, was the blossoming flower at the heart of high society—that she was *the* Countess Agrippina du Stahl?

Well, I supposed what was more unbelievable—at least, *I* didn’t want to believe it—was that I had gone from simple Erich of Konigstuhl to Count Erich du Stahl. Not only that, but after wasting my entire life in this baffling position, I’d been dragged out of my eternal rest to be propped up as a wraith.

“Quit that. It’s improper and you’re going to wrinkle your clothes.”

“Don’t be so fussy. You’ve been a noble for over two centuries at this point—would it be so much to ask that you learn to treat clothing as disposable?”

If you were to ask me how this had happened, I honestly couldn’t say. Things had been pushed forward so quickly that my fate had been sealed in the blink of an eye. By the time I’d gotten my bearings, I was a noble. Even then, I’d tried to go home, but the folks of Konigstuhl respectfully kept me at arm’s length as “Count Stahl.”

Seriously, what went wrong?

Details aside, the root cause was clear as day. With her professorship in hand, the duke’s eyes on her, and her ennoblement set in stone, this scoundrel had seen visions of her future. Her position in one of the most notable College factions along with her ties to a foreign powerhouse were honey to a swarm of flies; in addition to the ceaseless proposals, Lady Leizniz would surely torment her with banquet invitations that she couldn’t turn down.

But this rotten bitch had one out.

All she had to do was find a partner who could keep the suitors away—and I was the pitiful sacrifice.

I didn’t know why she’d chosen me. By my estimate, she’d made a calculated move to avoid the inconvenient ties and responsibilities that she’d have to take on by marrying an active peer. Pulling out every sinister trick in the book—ancestral revision, blood money, and thinly veiled threats, to name a few—I’d been propped up as the descendant of a long-lost aristocratic lineage. The baffling windfall turned my entire family into nobility overnight.

The story went that my grandfather had vanished after an attempt on his life, and hidden away in the countryside, biding his time for an eventual return to glory. If that wasn’t bad enough, I’d nearly lost my mind when the crest carved into Schutzwolfe had been submitted as “evidence” of my heritage.

“More importantly, are you *done* yet?”

“I’m looking through the invitations now.”

Then again, I guess I was part of the problem: here I was, obediently back for a second round after a lifetime of acting as her husband.

Honestly, what was this, anyway? To this day, I still couldn’t sort out how I felt on the matter; perhaps the most peculiar part was that I didn’t dislike it. I didn’t know whether that was a product of our physical bond or the children that had come of it, or whether it was a simple affliction of the mind. This was the woman who’d crushed my dreams, deserving of hatred more enduring than time itself...

So why am I diligently working for her sake? I truly was sick. I made a mental note to schedule a visit to the doctor's; a psychiatrist, of course—I'd long since graduated from the need to see a physician.

"There's a summons for tea from Marquis Keffenbach. They sent us a present to celebrate our youngest's induction the other day, so we'll have to be there."

"Whaaat? All the way to the North? What a bother..."

"I can go by myself if you want."

But there was one thing that still confused me.

"You know that won't do—I'll join you. We'll need to give our thanks together, so help me round up the children from the College, will you?"

Despite having propped me up to handle her busywork, my wife almost always came along when I went to give my salutations to others. At times, she even went out of her way to wrangle up the stringless kites—whom did they take after, I wondered—we called our daughters to join us.

I simply didn't get it. This had to have been far removed from her original design, so why had she bothered resurrecting me just for this?

Of course, I wasn't deluded enough to buy into fantasies of love. Ours was not so sugary a relationship; I'd realized as much when I'd started an affair in an attempt at petty vengeance, only to be casually forgiven. In fact, she'd nonchalantly offered to legitimize the child as our own.

I knew methuselah had a very different value set from mensch, but to not be affected at all had to be strange. If she did love me, I would've expected her to do something to either me or the person I'd cheated on her with—after all, *I* certainly would've.

Adultery is evil.

If I'd been in her shoes, both other parties involved could expect a swift beatdown. I wouldn't be able to let things end in the same way as those soul-crushing sob stories littering otherworldly magazines like land mines; no matter whom I faced, revenge would be my only recourse. For a lifetime and a half, the quiet despair of those betrayed had confounded me. Although I couldn't speak for my previous circumstances, in this world I had the power and money to put up a fight; if someone dared to wrong me without at least ending things in definite terms, any period of depression would give way to hellish retribution.

But she hadn't, and so this wasn't love. If nothing else, it wasn't any kind of love I understood.

"Hey, why don't you come sit? I can't relax with you floating around like this."

I'd been drifting about, thumbing through the invitations our

retainer had deemed important enough to elicit a personal answer, when my wife sat up straight out of the blue. This was her way of telling me to sit next to her, so I obliged without a word; in the past century and change, I'd grown used to her roundabout solicitations.

Manifesting a physical shell for my ethereal body, I took a seat. Just as I settled into a comfortable position, my wife slumped onto my lap. Three hundred years old, her perfect methuselah form hadn't withered in the slightest; the sensation of her skin on my legs was as bewitching as when I'd first felt it.

The years had seen me grow old and die, and when I returned, it was in youthful form; yet during all that time, she remained unchanging.

"Ahh... So comfy."

"Hey, don't fall asleep on me now. The baroness of Schafenberg has sent you, specifically, an invitation to the theater. Are you going?"

While the wifelike creature on my lap lazed about, I moved on to invitations that didn't involve me. The author of the letter was a bit of a bothersome lady: she was a big fan of dramas, but found it too lonely to watch alone, and could always be found searching for people to keep her company. As someone who preferred to go to the theater—for both movies and plays—by myself, she was my polar opposite.

As an aside, Agrippina didn't bother with going out at all. Had she been born on Earth, she would've been the sort to spare no expense, buying every disc release and subscribing to every streaming service in the name of kicking back in the comfort of her decked-out home theater. Of course, this wasn't really a hypothetical: this world's limitations didn't stop her from hiring whole troupes to perform at our manor.

"A play? Where? Ah, I imagine it must be the Berylinian Magic Lanterns if it's from Baroness Schafenberg. I haven't enjoyed their work recently, with the new director and all."

I felt bad for the poor guy. He'd taken the reins from the last director over twenty years ago, and yet my wife continued to treat him like a greenhorn. For a second, I felt like I'd slipped into a parallel version of Kyoto where centuries of residence still weren't enough to legitimize someone as a local.

"Well, whatever," she said. "And the showing?"

"They're putting on... Ugh."

One look at the title was enough to draw out an ignoble groan. I needed to be more careful; everyday habits were quick to slip in company, after all.

"What's the matter? Tell me the title."

"...*Echoes of Everlasting Love*, apparently."

"Ew..."

Matching my groan, she whined in sheer disgust. Of course she did: *we* were the source material.

Having lost his beloved wife, a methuselah journeyed into the depths of the underworld—a tragedy waiting to happen by every right. Yet guided by a bell crafted from their everlasting love, he groped through the afterlife until the gods themselves were moved to mercy. Altogether, the events made for a love story so sweet that it skipped past sugar into the realm of purified saccharin.

While the standard script swapped our genders, this director had gone through the trouble of revising the tale to have the *wife* venture in search of her husband; would the good count and countess like to join her, the baroness had asked.

She was asking us to join her for a play that depicted *us*—what the hell was wrong with this lady? There *had* to be something wrong with her brain.

“Would you kindly refuse?” Agrippina asked.

“Of course.”

A Hand reached over to a nearby desk, joining its brethren to compose yet another response.

Eternal love, my ass. Isn't that ridiculous?

I would never see it that way. The scoundrel was nuzzling into my legs, but this couldn't be her way of hiding her embarrassment—it just couldn't. No, surely, this refusal had to be another one of her dastardly schemes.

[Tips] *Echoes of Everlasting Love* is a tale in which the main character ventures to the other side in search of his deceased other half. His never-ending devotion is given physical form in the shape of a bell, and it guides him on an epic journey through the nether realm. Sweet and dramatic, it is a mainstay with viewers of all ages; such popularity has led to the creation of derivative works and spinoffs.

Most notably, the magic-lantern show in the imperial capital has produced a critically acclaimed version titled *Echoes of Everlasting Love: The Tale of a Baron's Daughter*. Over a millennium from now, not only will it be well-known as an incredibly long-running classic, but it will go on to be adapted into the mediums of literature, film, and comics.

Though they have been questioned, those depicted have thus far declined to comment.

Laying her head on tough muscle radiating a faint yet surprisingly vivacious warmth, Countess Stahl took a moment to review her memories: of the days when this husband of hers had been a servant,

of when he'd died, and of the days that had followed.

There wasn't any real reason for her reminiscence. Worn out from the banquet, her mind was simply idling along on meaningless topics; it sought comfort before it would be ready to begin weaving its next plot. That, and the title her husband—who was currently busy muttering rude comments about the baroness—had read aloud put it into her head.

Although the thought of an everlasting love had nothing to do with her, the words naturally pulled up old memories from her imperishable mind.

Looking back, theirs had been a long road.

When they first married—and she'd seen this coming, of course—things had been *quite* chaotic. No different from a pup being taken to be immunized just as it settled into a household, the boy's resistance had been fierce and his subsequent distrust in humanity impossible to dislodge.

However, no matter how much vitriol he possessed, the efforts of a boy not yet of age had been simple enough to crush. Looking back now, the methuselah felt some amount of culpability: her methodical plan to cut off his every escape hadn't exactly been the most considerate course of action. While she'd need to put in conscious effort to recall why she'd been in such a rush to get things settled, it was clear in hindsight that there had been plenty of other ways to get her way.

Even after she'd finished persuading him—read: breaking his spirit—the tension between them continued. Obviously, a boy forced to give up his dreams of adventure and break his vow to the girl from his hometown was never going to open his heart to the very person who'd derailed his life.

It was all but certain that had Agrippina been even marginally weaker than Erich, he would have come for her life. Alas, quixotic dreams and good sense were not mutually exclusive: he'd realized that his only hope was to bet on a better tomorrow. Armed with this wisdom, he'd chosen to keep his head down so as not to let a momentary rage endanger the lives of his family.

Agrippina's strained relationships—with husband and disciple both—had gone on for another few years. Shaken like a scared puppy, her spouse could do no more than make snide jabs in that time; though it'd been enough to set off a handful of verbal spats, the fact of the matter was that *mensch* were not built to remain angry forever.

The first turning point had come when he'd long since gotten used to carrying himself as a count, around the age of thirty: to Agrippina's complete and total surprise, a new life had taken hold within her.

In the first place, the preceding circumstances had only arisen

because she'd recognized her injustice and had thought it only fair to at least do something vaguely wifelike in exchange. For that to *hit the target*, as it were, had never been a consideration. Not only were methuselah beyond the biological need for reproduction, but they physically were not well tailored for the process: female methuselah were fertile for a few days per year at *most*.

Bemused by the peculiar turn of events, she'd decided to let her husband know. Yet while she'd taken the time to share the news out of a sense of obligation—he'd been the one to supply one half of the mixture, after all—Agrippina hadn't considered childbirth in any real sense.

Unaging and undying, she fell in line with the rest of her ilk on the topic of rearing a successor. Winning greater glory through the achievements of her children spurred zero interest, and she could not have cared less about causing trouble for others in the event she died without a proper heir. Whatever fate befell the county after she was gone was, in no uncertain terms, not her damn problem.

Thus, in Agrippina's mind, the option to flush it all away as water under the bridge had been prominent. If she *had* to have an heir, an adoptee would do; she'd seen no reason to bother pushing a newborn out between her legs just to spend a full century raising one of her own kind. Frankly, she had been perfectly content to adopt one of the bastard children Erich had fathered—if he'd done so in an attempt to spite her, he'd made a hilarious miscalculation—in his youth.

Yet when she broke the news, her husband's jaw had gone slack with shock; he'd wobbled over to her, placed a hand on her stomach, and after a few moments of silence, said, "I see."

For whatever reason, when she heard those words and saw his tender expression, the first thought to cross her mind had been *I suppose I'll bear him a child*.

What precisely had set off this change of heart, not even Agrippina herself truly understood. Had she found it funny how the ornery man she'd penned into her family register had suddenly softened up? Had some faint, dormant sense of motherly instinct risen up from the basest parts of her mind? Even now, the answer eluded her, and her retrospections brought it no closer.

It wasn't as if her pregnancy had changed everything all at once. But where her husband had once vanished without a trace in between his duties, he'd begun to mention where he'd be headed in advance; when he returned home, he did so with presents in hand. For her part, she hadn't given their relationship any deliberation either, and had kept along perfectly normally.

However, the same could not be said after their child was *born*.

In a world where men were keen to sow their seed without any

intention to harvest, Erich was the dedicated sort, keen to fret and fuss over the most minor of things. He'd stayed at Agrippina's bedside—much to the chagrin of the midwives—during labor, and had held her hand even as she completely dulled the pain with magic.

After a delivery devoid of hardship, the only impression she could muster upon taking the thing in hand had been, *So this is it?* Yet when her husband came to pluck the babe away, he'd held the newborn up with bleary eyes and cooed, "You're finally here... Welcome to the world." The image was forever branded into Agrippina's eyes.

Erich's piety had not stopped after childbirth. When he came to visit them in the days following, he would always take their daughter—that Agrippina hadn't been able to tell at first whether she'd borne a boy or girl was a secret she guarded to this day—from the wet nurse and go about his work with her cradled in his arms.

Was it then out of some fanciful whim that she'd asked? Laying in a bed she'd planned to leave vacant with her husband dragging on a smoldering pipe, the words had come out: "Why do you trouble yourself so with the child?"

He balked, words stuck in his throat. And then, exhaling fumes that gave shape to his shame, he answered: "Because I finally understand what she meant by, 'I won't let you near her until your heart is pure.'"

Basically, the woman with whom Erich had been seeking solace hadn't been an entirely convenient entity ready to accept his every selfish desire. Agrippina didn't even know his mistress's name, but surmised that while she was willing to be used as sanctuary for another's comfort, she couldn't stand to let her child be subject to the same treatment—a very human sentiment, the methuselah thought.

For whatever reason, Agrippina had found that hilarious: she'd laughed and laughed until her sides nearly twisted off. She vividly remembered how he'd eventually lost his temper and gone off on her too.

As the air between them loosened and their baby turned into a toddler, she had been astonished to find that one unlikely surprise could be followed by another of its variety: by the time their firstborn was fully weaned at the age of five, Agrippina's belly had begun to swell again.

This time, she had truly been stunned. Not seeing the need for any additional children, she'd begun employing contraceptive spells; yet it seemed she had stumbled into a most curious turn of fate. Truth be told, she had a vague idea of the culprit: on some nights, she had been so thoroughly exhausted that she'd drifted off with what could hardly be called perfect precautions.

But why would we ever need two? she had been ready to say, only

for her husband to once again place a hand on her stomach and whisper, “I see...” He had even gone to fetch their daughter, beckoning her to do the same; it was then that Agrippina once more was overcome with a sense that, oh, fine, she’d bear him another.

For that to repeat a total of *four* times was a real feat. In particular, their second and third had been born in back-to-back years; the public had reacted as if they were the forewarning of world-ending cataclysm.

Around that time, the pair had grown completely accustomed to their “loving couple” act, and whether as a genuine commendation or an ironic slight, they’d been cemented in imperial lexicon with references to *Stahlian* love; even then, the thought of a single methuselah mothering so many children had been nigh unthinkable. Two over the course of a long life was impressive enough, but three was basically a miracle. Their disinterest in reproduction was the only thing keeping their kind from dominating the planet, after all.

Regardless, a third child they had, and only a year off from their second at that. Everywhere she went, Agrippina had been welcomed with surprise and well-wishes; she’d found it tiresome, of course, but also uncomfortable in equal part. Despite knowing that it would push back many of her plans, she’d distanced herself from social life—it seemed not even a self-centered methuselah like her could shrug off the embarrassment the rumors stirred up. This was an inconvenience to others, but no one could get a word in edgewise with her husband backing the decision.

By the time their firstborn had enrolled at the College at the age of thirty, her husband had set foot into the territory of old age. Yet he still stood straight and had all his teeth, so Agrippina hadn’t paid it much mind when others pointed it out.

True, a closer inspection saw his skin beginning to sag, or his shimmering gold hair washing out to a dull silver; but it had been difficult to see a man who dauntlessly hopped onto horses to ride around as elderly. Perhaps least convincing of all was another dimension of his continued activity: though she’d heard mortal men were less susceptible to waning libido than their female counterparts, his vitality was hardly that of a graying soul.

Still, numbers were numbers. Agrippina had carelessly written off the possibility of fertility for a mensch sixty years of age, only to be shocked by an unprecedented *fourth* child.

Society had erupted as feverishly as when they’d conceived two years in a row. While one might expect waves of joy to see another avenue of connection with the illustrious Stahl household, the pervasive attitude had been closer to that of perplexity. Was the count really a mensch? Was the countess really a *methuselah*?

Destiny was a curious thing—for the servant who had once been Erich of Konigstuhl, to be sure, but also for the woman who had intended to live and die as the individual Agrippina du Stahl.

At the mercy of her children's growth and the occasional debacles they caused—whomever did they take after, she wondered—Agrippina had lost track of time. But time was steadfast; its unwavering flow left no mortal behind, no matter how full of life they seemed to be.

By eighty, the hand that had carried his son was wrapped around a walking cane.

At eighty-five, he could no longer mount a horse.

Counting to ninety, he lost his teeth and bemoaned all that he could not eat.

Reaching ninety-five, the time he spent upright drastically declined, until he spent most of his day bedridden at one hundred.

And in the winter of his 106th year, their farewell came.

Apologizing for failing to see his children come of age and entrusting her with a letter for their second daughter, conspicuously absent from his deathbed, the count ended his long service to his wife with the words, "It's finally over..."

Yet even as she watched the coffin sink into earth, nothing had changed for Agrippina...or so she would have liked to claim. But she caught herself calling his name when a chore came up, ordering new nightgowns that nobody would ever see, and sitting in his office, wondering if he might return in spite of knowing full well that he wouldn't.

Faced with her irrational behavior, she explained it to herself: this was all because her convenient scapegoat had vanished all on his own.

Immediately, Agrippina was engulfed in fury. Who had said he was free to die? Who had given him permission to abandon his post as her husband to rest peacefully upon the laps of the gods?

The overflowing anger had become a force pushing her forward, fueling her research until finally they reached the present day.

Glancing up at her husband, dutifully serving as her pillow as he'd done in life, the methuselah chuckled to herself. This wasn't the love of which the poets sang; it was merely the product of a self-serving desire.

[Tips] Artificial wraithification is the brainchild of Countess Agrippina du Stahl, developed in tandem with several College professors, most notable among them Professor Magdalena von Leizniz.

The process can resurrect a deceased individual in the form of a wraith, but has many restrictions: the target must have immense magical power, the catalyst must be deeply intertwined

with the target's soul, the target's body must be well-preserved, etc. With a list of prerequisites dozens of entries long, a second instance of the ritual has yet to be confirmed; as for the committee responsible for the only documented success, it has since dissolved, citing the revival of Count Erich du Stahl as a completion of the project's goals.

The oddities of your own family are hard to spot until you grow up.

"Oh, you're here?"

At least, that was the feeling that sank in upon seeing my mother for the first time in a long while. It was hard to imagine she was talking to her own son with a greeting this brusque, but I was used to it. My old man loved getting himself involved with my life—to the point of meddling, at times—but my mother had hardly ever bothered. That said, it wasn't like I was the odd one out: she treated my sisters in the exact same way.

"Your reception is as terse as ever, mother."

Contrasted against her aloof demeanor, I felt like I was in the running for the picture of filial piety. I spent all my time putting out fires *she* should've been handling to cover for my dad, who was constantly saddled under a mountain of work. My main duty was cleaning up after my sisters—the youngest's botched marriage talks I'd smoothed out the other day had been a true catastrophe—if and when they caused trouble; frankly, anyone else in my position would've married off or run away.

In fact, I'd *just* come back from a tea party with some folks who wanted to make friends with my dad. Could you believe it? I wasn't even an adult yet!

Exhausted, I'd dragged myself to our tearoom to blow off steam in the short break I had before my next social event, only to run into my mother and receive the most affectionate of greetings. It sure must be easy when you can push all your responsibilities aside and go sit in a library for months on end.

More importantly, had she seriously forgotten? I hadn't taken time out of my busy schedule—for our *family's* interests, mind you—to come home without reason. Seriously, she should be thankful that I hadn't abandoned my post and run off.

Letting my noble mask slip, I scratched at my head in frustration; my mother then casually got up from the couch she was laying on and came over. She drew closer and closer, and even though she was my own mother, my heart skipped a beat when she leaned right into my neck.

"Wh-What are—"

“How gallant you must be to have perfume clinging to you while the sun still hangs high.”

My heart skipped again, but for a completely different reason. *No—no, no, no. That’s not it. I just, you know, figured that talks would go smoother if I was close to the lord’s daughter. And, uh...*

“Goodness. Why have you turned out to be such a philanderer?”

“I-It’s not like I’m the one going after *them*.”

“But you *are* the one inviting the chase, aren’t you?” With a mocking scoff, my mother returned to the couch and started filing through the letters on the table; while her eyes were fixed on paper, though, I could feel her attention remain on me. “Refrain from playing with mensch, will you?”

“Wha— How can you tell?”

“Any girl covered in a layer of fragrance so desperate is all but sure to be mensch.”

That she’d seen through me to this degree sent a chill down my spine. How did everyone else get along with their mothers? Just the thought that I’d been pried from this monster’s legs made the monster between my own shrivel up in fear.

“...Then why are you wed to father?” I spat, trying to reclaim some semblance of pride.

“*I’m* a different matter,” she said through another derisive chuckle. “When all is said and done, I took care of him until his final breath.”

I wondered how dad would react if I told him she’d said that. My best guess is he’d make the same face as when he’d bitten into that spoiled strawberry.

“Mensch are sentimental—much more so than we can ever be. Their every moment is more densely packed.”

Neither the letters nor her lecture showed any signs of slowing down. Deeply stained by academe, her words felt like a rationalization of a belief originating somewhere deeper.

Mensch were frail, their whole lives passing by in fractions of our own. Those born in the same year as me had grown up, retired, and been laid to rest; to me, they seemed to be rushing through life. Perhaps that was why we could replicate their thinking, but never their feelings.

Mortal emotion was a passionate thing. Their intensity was so great that I could only wonder how they gave so much of themselves to a single day, hour, or passing moment.

“They are creatures susceptible to devotion. Should they take a liking to you, they will offer up the rest of their fleeting lives without hesitation. Do you have what it takes to accept their zeal?”

My only response was a quiet grumble. She was right: I’d been

sworn such love before. For your sake; for your smile; anything for you—how many times had I heard these words accompanied by presents or favors, spoken by those I called acquaintances, friends, or even lovers?

Among them, I was sure that some would have been willing to hand me their beating heart in no metaphorical sense had I only willed it; to push away their next of kin to hold my hand in their final moments had been proof enough to show their depths of love.

“If you don’t, then shoo them away. It isn’t as if you’re going to inherit the house, are you?”

“Well...no.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that. I know your father has high expectations for you, but nobody in Rhine will say a word about your sister taking on the title instead. And it isn’t as though there’s anybody else who might complain, with how tiny our family is.”

She briskly worked through the stack of papers, jotting down notes for those she’d need to reply to—a habit she must’ve picked up from dad, since she obviously didn’t need help with her recollection—but I was stuck standing awkwardly without anything left to say.

The title of Count Stahl came with its own localized field of supergravitational pull—such was the weight of the burden. As “tiny” as my mother made it out to be, our household held power wildly disproportionate to its size. Though the whole of our bloodline was contained between us six and our territory was middling at best, we were just as influential as, if not even stronger in some places than, the electorate houses.

Our ties to the throne ran deep: for a long stretch, Count Stahl had been upheld as the crown’s most trusted vassal. Furthermore, our sprawling social network was packed with powerful allies. The only thing holding us back was that my sisters, despite all being of age, had failed to solidify even a single marital alliance between the three of them.

In more tangible terms, the clans in the Empire capable of matching our fortune could be counted on my fingers, and our military capacity was absurdly high. Not only did I keep a personal entourage of generals, but my old man had once taken the time to tour around and personally train our citizenry—lunacy, according to the other lords—to bolster the combat readiness of our lowest foot soldiers.

Besides, why would we worry when all of these forces combined couldn’t even come close to my oldest sister? After all, merely *hinting* that the Ashsower might appear in battle was usually enough to drain the color from our enemies’ faces. Standing armies aside, our resident polemurge was more than enough to solidify us as a force to be

reckoned with.

Putting the walking weapon of mass destruction aside, we were also related to the powerful Forets barony of Seine; the connection magnified our political standing to absurd levels.

Anyone who wanted to inherit the title would need a heart of pure steel.

On that note, my oldest sister was a good fit, making her the default front-runner for the position. Physically, she looked like someone had handpicked all the best features from each of our parents; magically, she was an unkillable monster permanently encased in impenetrable barriers. Her talent for polemurgy was so remarkable that she'd developed a large-scale, battlefield-wiping spell that got our old man to babble something about "tiltowaits" in awe; we'd never have to worry about her being assassinated.

Moreover, her mentality was stronger than the stiffest arcane alloys. Despite earning many, *many* epithets that were rather rude descriptions for an unwed maiden, she had the fortitude to shrug off the whispering voices. Personally, I thought she would make the best count out of all of us.

Unfortunately, she either didn't know or didn't care about the expectations on her shoulders, and spent the whole of her time drowning in her hobbies.

Gods, she was the oldest, so would it have killed her to show a *little* responsibility? I was sick of hearing her fairy-tale dreams about how one day a Prince Charming would come for her. I wished she'd find a decent man and take the house already—I wished she'd let our old man be free.

"But you know," my mother said, "the title is actually quite useful if you wish to collect your favorite mortals for yourself. Whether you choose to marry them, lock them away, or employ them as your servants, it is all too easy for a count to do."

"...I would never go that far."

They might vanish in the blink of an eye, but bearing witness to every passing second of a mortal's life didn't speak to me. If they, as part of their own journey, came to call me a friend, that was wonderful; if they loved me enough to keep me close until the very end, then I could ask for nothing more. But to cage them up like mom had done to dad? I just didn't have the heart to see a whole life spent that way.

Let me be perfectly frank. I loved mortals. Their emotions were more dazzling than fireworks, hot enough to melt away the rust ever encroaching on my own.

Yet my love was not that of a gardener gently raising a greenhouse rose. The vivacity that had stolen my heart was that of a

summer blossom, blooming proudly in the face of the callous march of time.

I knew that this was immortal arrogance at its finest. They had their own struggles, and the very emotions that I found so mesmerizing were the source of much of their grief; I'd at least learned that much in the time I'd spent with them.

And so too had I learned that we would never truly feel the same.

They were beautiful because they were beyond my comprehension; they were lovable because they were beyond my knowing; they gleamed in maddening radiance because they were beyond my grasp.

How? How had mother convinced herself to fence my old man away? Let loose, he would no doubt have lived such a wonderful life. Even as his son, the precious moments I'd spent on his lap reading stories seemed a hideous waste of his potential.

By the time my mind had formed, my dad had already been walking with a cane; yet even then, he had lived in such a fun and delightful way. He'd taught me more than any tutor, and his bedtime stories had been better than any nanny's.

But every time, I couldn't help but wonder: *If he's this exciting now, what kind of amazing person would he be if he'd been free to do whatever he wanted?*

So why? Why had she squandered his life as a boring old husband, only to do so again as a wraith? It was like she'd held the script to the drama to end all dramas in hand, but had burned it away before the actors could put on a show.

"Oh! You're home already?"

While I was busy brooding over a feeling too confusing to boil down to one emotion, someone had come into the room without so much as opening the door. I didn't need to turn around, of course; the source of this subdued voice and quiet presence had phased through the wall out of laziness.

"Welcome home. Did you have fun at the tea party?"

"Yes, I did. And welcome home to you too, father."

My old man flashed me a gentle smile—one much younger than any I'd seen in my childhood. Though now translucent, this had been his body in days long since passed; what kind of person had he been then? What sort of feelings had he borne, and how had he carried himself at mother's side?

I hid my curiosity behind the polite grin he'd passed down to me and capped off my greeting with a light bow.

"My, what brings you home as well?" mother asked.

"Don't tell me you forgot."

"Was...there something I should have remembered? Well, in any

case, here—switch with me.”

After a stunningly heartless statement, she got up and pushed the stack of envelopes into my old man’s hands and pulled him over to the couch. Sitting him down, she joined him and immediately reclined onto his lap; the will to do any work at all simply did not exist inside her. My highborn friends often complained that their parents continued to meddle after giving up their official position, but there wasn’t a chance our mother would ever bother.

But, to be fair, my dad was just as much at fault for slavishly accepting his place. He always had the option of erasing his physical form so she’d fall straight through him. Sighing wouldn’t do him any good if he just put up with her selfishness; that was why she was so spoiled in the first place.

“Wow, we sure have gotten a lot of invitations... Wait! Don’t just reject everything when I’m not around. Look at this: we *have* to attend this one from Viscount Werdian. We’re in the middle of talks over trade route maintenance, remember?”

“Oh, can’t we *not*? He’s just marrying off his *second* daughter. A celebratory letter is more than enough for those nobodies.”

“You can’t go around calling them ‘nobodies’ when they’ve just secured a marriage with an imperial branch family. And this is his *favorite* daughter—look at how obvious it is that he wants to show off her big day. In fact, it sounds like he wants us to bring our kids along too, which is convenient enough.”

“But it’s so apparent that he wants to take in one of ours. Does he think we aren’t aware he lost all his money in that plumbing fiasco?”

The tension hanging in the room instantly vanished as my mother let her laziness take hold; I didn’t know how I was supposed to react. Ever since dad had come back, I felt like her degeneration had only been accelerating. It was as if she was trying to scrounge up the decades of lethargy she’d lost while he’d been gone.

Back when he’d been sleeping easy in the underworld, our mother wouldn’t have wasted a single moment seizing hold of us, dressing us up, and dragging us around with a dainty smile. I swore she hadn’t been the type to let her interests preoccupy her to the degree that she’d let a juicy political opportunity like this one slip. Hell, even when dad *had* been alive, she’d done a fine job when he could no longer walk.

My old man’s presence only served to worsen her disgrace. If he’d stopped coddling her and forced her to act like her rank, maybe he could’ve actually done whatever it was he’d wanted to. Honestly, they were such a puzzling match that it was hard to believe both their blood ran through my veins.

After fixing all the sloppy paperwork and grumbling the whole

while, he sighed and reached into a pocket of space. At the same time, I noticed three unhidden waves of mana shake up the hallway just outside. I would know these mystic signatures anywhere: it had to be my sisters. Wildly talented yet deeply flawed, they were prone to brushing off our mother's summons; however, not even they could ignore one from our father.

"What is this?"

My mother squinted apprehensively at the small box dad handed her, but I knew the truth. Too embarrassed to accept an earnest celebration, she'd tweaked her brain to always forget the occasion. She couldn't hide that from me; I'd been her son for nearly a century.

That being said, it seemed like Father Dearest hadn't caught on after *over* a century of being her husband. That seemed a little dense, even if he'd been mortal at one point.

"Happy anniversary, mother! Let's go eat something yummy! Oh, and father, can I *please* open the 544-year Seinian red for the occasion?"

"I wonder if this is really a day to celebrate when it's the reason we were born..."

"Congratulations, Mother Dearest. And my deepest condolences to you, Father Dearest. I take it you haven't brought any troublesome marital talks with you this time?"

Not a single one of them bothered with a proper greeting—frankly, I could see any other parents losing their minds over this level of impudence—but their filing through the doorway finally got mother to catch on. She held up the box without much interest and dubiously said, "Ahh, I see."

Eating dinner together on the night of their wedding anniversary was apparently a practice my dad had come up with as an act of petty vengeance. Not that he'd told me or anything; I'd just gleaned as much from the journal entries he'd written around that time. Speaking of which...he didn't know I read through his diary after he'd passed, did he?

"Well, that's how it is," he said. "Congratulations, and here's to another year."

"Yes, yes. Thank you very much."

As casual as her thanks were, mother unwrapped the box with unparalleled care. Opening it, she took out the contents and raised it up to the light: it was a new hairpin. At the end of its wooden shaft were a handful of chains, each beaded with bloodred gems that glistened like candy drops. Traces of dad's mana wafted off, proving its handmade quality; enchanted with powerful protective magic, he'd selected for materials valuable enough to uphold its recipient's status.

Now I knew why he'd vanished on our way home from the capital

the other day to go handle a “quick errand”; he must’ve been busy preparing this gift. Even as his son, it was hard to get a read on the guy.

But boy, I wished he’d let us go first.

“This is going to be *such* a chore to maintain...”

Because despite mother’s detached response, she merrily tucked the pin into her hair. How was I supposed to follow that?

[Tips] Celebrations for wedding anniversaries used to be very uncommon, but as references to Stahlian love grow, so too do Stahlian customs. In recent years, some nobles have begun to imitate the namesake couple as a show of romantic flair.

With supper shifting into full swing, I looked around a table a touch too small for a household of nobles. Yet they were all merry, and a sudden thought came to me: *My family sure is full of weirdos.*

Of my sisters, the oldest really was the perfect mix between our parents—on the outside. The gentle waves of her golden hair paired perfectly with the deep blue of her eyes. On top of that, she was tall and slender, her chest was huge, and her face was the epitome of a tender maiden; but the cover did *not* tell the whole story.

Famed as a direct disciple of Dean Leizniz of the largest Daybreak cadre in the College, she had earned so much notoriety as a polemurge that her moniker, the Ashsower, preceded her abroad.

The heavens may have bestowed her with many a gift, but they had taken all her common sense in return. Even with all my brotherly love, I couldn’t deny the allegations that she was a *fucking loon*.

Aristocratic class was a foreign concept to her: she spent most of the year wandering other countries in the name of paleontology. I didn’t know what had set off this obsession of hers, but last time, she’d come back from the Southern Sea saying she’d dug up the fossil of a prehistoric dragon. If that wasn’t easygoing enough, she’d brought home a whole mountain’s worth of rocks and clogged up our entire storehouse.

Worst of all, her canned response whenever anyone brought up the idea of marriage was, “Aww, but I’m waiting for my Prince Charming. I want someone stronger than me to sweep me off my feet!” Sorry to say, but I’d yet to come across a living person who fit that description. *Please, I’m begging you. Just come back to reality and settle for a normal guy.*

On the same note, the requirements that her husband had to be as skilled *and* lenient as our old man needed to go; our dad was a statistical anomaly in both metrics. Dreaming that she might stumble into the same ludicrous luck as mother was pure fantasy.

Alas, our dad still fawned on her like she was a little girl in spite of the fact that she was closing in on the age our mother had married at. The two of them looked to be having fun tonight, but I couldn't help but wonder if my sister understood the tremendous burden he carried out of sight.

Next in line, my middle sister was problematic in entirely different ways. In fact, she was such a cloistered shut-in that I'd hardly spoken to her in the past few years.

Setting aside how everyone I knew said her face was just a feminine copy of our dad's—mainly because now that he'd regained his youthful visage, I could hardly see any difference at all—her appearance was most notable for the recessive black hair she'd gotten from our mother's end. More notable than that, however, was that she was a professor of *Polar Night*, and that she led a small cadre of like-minded weirdos as their dean.

Having received honors directly from the Emperor for her achievements, she'd become known as the Inky Magekiller. Although she'd begun carrying herself with more dignity since earning the epithet, at home she was the runt of the litter, sheepishly sitting as far away from dad as she could while glancing up at him every few seconds.

If there was anything she'd inherited from our mother, it was her decadent level of indolence and her penchant for cajoling lower-born sons into entering her orbit. But for all her outward decorum, I knew the real her: not only had she spent decades regretting how she hadn't come to dad's deathbed because of a long-standing fight, but she hadn't gotten in a single real conversation with him since he came back.

Though, if I was being fair, our old man definitely shared some of the blame. No matter how well written they were, compiling all of the poems she'd stashed away and sending the finished anthology to her crossed the line. Look, I loved my dad, but even *I* would've snapped had he done that to me. I wasn't going to defend him just because he hadn't published it: few in number as they were, he'd shown others her work. The understanding that he'd done so out of fatherly pride did *not* alleviate the issue.

That still didn't warrant my sister's final response, of course, but we were all back together now. Carrying this awkwardness for years and years was absurd; if she worked up the courage to say sorry, I knew our dad would smile, forgive her, and apologize himself.

With the first and second children of our household being so troubled, you might expect the third to seem better by comparison. Unfortunately, she came with her own set of loose screws.

The youngest of my older sisters was the very same person who'd

thrown me a heaping pile of issues to solve after bungling her marriage negotiations. She, too, was a magus. Like the others, she was a verifiable genius who'd already been inducted into the professoriat; however, her quirks had taken a very unique spin.

You see, my third sister was a First Light scholar, loyal to the *Sponheim* cadre. That's right: she was the final apprentice of our dad's oldest friend, of the target of many unsubstantiated rumors, of Professor Mika von Sponheim. Now, I didn't know what kind of bizarre fermentation process a mind had to go through to reach this point, but her final takeaway as their pupil had been to boldly and openly declare that our old man should've married von Sponheim instead.

I understood the reverence for von Sponheim: I'd loved them too. Just like my old man, they'd been a kind old grandma, grandpa, or sometimes grandperson by the time my wits had come about me, and they'd been a truly upstanding character. Being a *tivisco*, we'd said our farewells many years ago; I still vividly remembered how hard I'd sobbed then.

Even so, I couldn't condone how my sister picked a fight with dad for not choosing—for not being *able* to choose, as far as I was concerned—von Sponheim every time she got drunk. That, and how she cried over their not staying with us as a wraith. On the latter point, I couldn't see why she'd ever say that. Wraiths were only ever born from powerful anguish over work not yet accomplished; how could she believe that was possible when von Sponheim had looked like they were falling into a peaceful midday nap in their final moments?

This dogged fealty to von Sponheim had earned my sister the delicately worded nickname Frozen Gold. Architects—and especially oikodomurges—were constantly in demand amongst the gentry; she should've had her pick of potential suitors if not for her fixations.

Uh... Now that I think about it, my sisters are horrible, aren't they?

Compared to them, I was a perfectly normal guy. Though I'd been inducted into the College, I still wasn't of age and sat at the rank of researcher as a result. In the meantime, I did my part to serve the Empire as a loyal bureaucrat. I'd signed up with the *Leizniz* cadre of Daybreak, taking after mother; despite being indebted to the dean for two generations in a row, I managed to get along with everyone just fine.

From what I could gather, my sisters had left all the diligence our father had tried to pass on in the womb; clearly, I'd been the one to pick it up. That must've been why I was stuck cleaning up after their bohemian lifestyles. Our old man had done the same for our mom, so this was a clear case of genetics.

As the rest of my family mystically lowered their tolerance to get tipsy off wine, I alone watched them, dead sober. But as I surveyed the table, I happened to lock eyes with my father.

So I asked him.

“Father, did your marriage make you happy?”

Yet the only response that I got was the same kind, ambiguous smile as always.

[Tips] House Stahl’s only son has made a name for himself off his resemblance to his father, though most would agree he sports an air of cuter innocence. However, he is perhaps better known for his talent and ruthlessness in the political sphere, where the Second Wolf is spoken of only in hushed whispers. His great number of loyal adherents and casual ability to stack every card in his favor have led some to believe he is the most difficult to deal with amongst his family.

Once upon a time, I had been terrified of the undying.

After all, the only immortals I’d known had possessed very *intense* personalities. The first one I’d ever met had been a methuselah personifying the very idea of sloth; the next had been a wraith who continued to enjoy her perverse pastimes to this day; after that had come an undead warrior trying to pass on his favorite blade; and then I’d run into a vampire, centuries old. Each and every one had been a colossus in their own right, fit to crown a campaign as its final boss.

Gripped by fear, I could have never imagined this fate as I was then.

“Hey.”

“Mm?”

In a world only populated by the turning of paper or occasional scribble, a splash of color rang out: the familiar voice soaked into my ears. Looking over, I was met with my nuisance of an other half.

No matter how many times I cast eyes upon her, I could never get used to the perfect form of her beauty. It had been over a century since we’d first met, but the figure she hid under only a single nightgown had not dulled in the slightest. The soft light of mystic lamps shimmered off silver strands of hair in the most enchanting of ways; deep blue and light jade listlessly squinted my way, threatening to enthrall me with just one look.

Sat facing me with her back resting on the other end of the couch, Countess Agrippina du Stahl let out a yawn and asked, “What day is it?”

I thought about it, but the answer did not come readily.

“Oh... What day is it?”

Engrossed in my reading, I'd lost track of time. More to the point, I couldn't remember how long we'd been camped up here in one of the College library's private rooms. The room was furnished only with an unembellished desk, a small sofa to rest on, and the massive piles of books we'd brought in—such was the way of things in the library's lowest floors. Despite being colloquially referred to as the forbidden vault, the censored sea of content it offered was free to swim in so long as one had reasonable justification; we waded in head-high.

It had all begun at the end of the social season. Not even this bothersome wife of mine could get through a whole winter of fraternizing without growing tired, and she'd moaned that she wanted to fill her mind with “only the enjoyable things in life” for a time.

Obviously, what she found most enjoyable of all was to coop up and read. To that end, she'd built a massive library in our own manor—not that she'd been involved in its design or construction—and usually crawled into that whenever she felt weary.

I'd thought that, as per usual, she was going to do so again and leave the trifling matters of daily life to me. Yet the possibility of abdication—Her Majesty had cried about potentially running away again—had made this past winter particularly exhausting with how involved we were in the matter. Not content with her usual indulgences, she dragged me here with our son and daughters in tow.

Why bring the children, you ask? Well, we needed permission to enter the forbidden vault, to use the keys for its locked sections, to hole up for an extended period of time, and to get away with jotting down light notes that we could take home with us. Cutting a deal with Lady Leizniz to trade one child per clause had been, in my wife's words, an easy sell.

Around now, they were probably being lavishly pampered with the most excessive clothes money could buy. In particular, I was most concerned about my son: the dean had taken a keen liking to him, and I was worried she might spoil him in a way that would see the Leizniz name added to his official records.

Man, that would be a disaster. What kind of terrible karma would he have to be born with to have a wraith parent *and* a wraith bride? I started feeling pity for the boy; if he began cursing me over his baby face and small stature, I wouldn't know what to say.

“It seems as if we've been here for some time, but also as if it's hardly been a minute.”

“I feel that.”

I so felt that. This was a quale that I simply could not have understood as a mensch. Eternal life warped the senses: concentration wound the clock faster and faster, and the outside world never stopped to wait. Capable of literally forgoing food and sleep, the

concept of time was reduced to a mere frivolity for the immortal.

The occasions on which we paid it any mind were scarce: either when a schedule was rigidly set in place, or when watching over a mortal who might vanish as soon as we looked away. In that sense, I understood now that Agrippina had been rather delicate with me when I had been a mensch.

“How many have you read?”

“Uh... Thirty-two.”

“I’ve read sixty-two.”

She’d managed to gain a huge lead on me, but that was only because she’d chosen tales and historical annals banned for social or religious reasons. Meanwhile, I’d been working through thaumaturgic treatises that required more time to decipher. I’d once gotten bored enough with my infinite time to develop a spell that decoded a text and instantaneously transmitted the information contained within to my brain, but it had been so dreary that I hadn’t used it since. Instead, I relied on skills like Speed Reading and Quick Context to get through books at a solid pace.

That said, our stacks of finished tomes weren’t a useful measure of how much time had passed. Both of us were the types to read a good page over and over again, leaving us without a benchmark for how long it took to get from cover to cover.

Besides, I was a wraith and she was a methuselah. We didn’t have any regular interruptions of food, water, and the digestive needs they introduced to count. As convenient as it was to reduce consumption to an aesthetic choice, it was just as detrimental in different vectors. I could see why solitary confinement was the highest punishment in all the lands.

“What have you read?” she asked.

“Hrm... There was one from three hundred years ago that caught my interest. It theorizes a possible exploitation of the heat-dispersing side effects that come with transferring extradimensional matter to the physical world. I can only imagine it got thrown down here because of the scribbled note at the end speculating that the world itself could potentially end if someone managed to bring an object with negative heat from an alternate plane.”

“I recall reading that in my youth. It was rather enjoyable.”

“I bet you thought to yourself, ‘I could pull that off.’”

“But of course.”

Although she giggled like a mischievous child, that meant she was capable of pulling off the worst case of terrorism *ever* at any given moment.

Though, honestly, I wasn’t one to talk: I’d gotten to the same level in the past century or so. At this point, I could show up in someone

else's long-form campaign as a true archenemy—let it be known that if I ever got the chance to face a party of adventurers as their final challenge, I would do everything in my power to live up to the role.

Trying to discern how much time had passed was a fruitless endeavor, and we had yet to be scolded; we got back to it like the depraved bookworms we were. We'd picked out a lot of books before setting up camp, and our pile of unread tomes was still brimming with options.

Returning to a world populated only by myself and pages of words, time ticked on. Minutes or eons passed, when I suddenly felt a tickling on my legs.

I glanced over to see the missus wriggling her toes. Her fingers unconsciously did the same, sliding across a cover with a rather salacious title. The work was probably a sensuous love story, sent to the library's depths for its outrageous depictions of romance.

Multiculturalism in the Trialist Empire meant the national value set remained in a minor state of flux; at times, erotica was published freely, and at others, our moral standards were markedly more stoic. This one seemed like a tale that had been outlawed under puritan oversight, left here simply because relabelling it was too much work.

Agrippina had a habit of wiggling her fingers and toes when absorbed in a book, but I'd only noticed after I'd given up, so to speak. That I'd failed to take note of her finer mannerisms back when she was the sort to fling off her clothes and loiter around naked made me think she only let them slip when she was truly relaxed—like, say, while reading.

Huh. Do I have habits like that?

I turned the page. If I did have some kind of quirk of manner, then it was probably something I could never catch onto myself. Just as I knew hers, she probably knew mine...and much to my perplexity, that thought didn't bother me in the slightest.

[Tips] The College's forbidden vault of books contains works of writing censored for both technical and moral reasons.

Rhetorical devices expertly danced around literal depiction, outlining the ravenous connection between man and woman. The mind nibbled at prose, carefully savoring the flavor before eventually letting out a satisfied sigh—truly, time well spent. Where lesser work would have failed to draw out so much as the basest sense of eroticism, the technical skill upon which it was formed struck Agrippina with a sense of admiration. Letting out a deep breath, she made a mental note to petition the crown for a reclassification: she wished to have a full copy transcribed.

Finished with her book, she looked up at her better half. His brow was furrowed, and he was so deeply immersed in his reading that he failed to notice the movements of their interlocked legs as she leaned over to set her book aside. She'd seen him like this many times since his return, but his old habit of rolling his neck to loosen up nonexistent muscles never ceased to amuse her.

All those years ago, when she had first plucked his soul from its tranquil slumber at the bottom of the underworld, her first observation had been one of grievance: he'd adapted too swiftly.

Agrippina had heard that mortals-turned-immortals tended to carry old habits around with them. There were tales of vampires eating three meals a day and tucking in at night, or wraiths who pondered how to best bathe for the sake of eliminating their hypothetical body odor. She'd found these anecdotes terribly funny; those born everlasting couldn't quite understand their hurried peers, but those born with limited time never truly caught up to the vastness of eternity.

However, the husband she'd spent a lifetime with had been unnaturally quick to readjust.

Any loss of focus could cause him to slip through objects, but he mastered his ethereality within the day and nonchalantly commented, "It's nice not having to open doors." On the topic of food and drink, he had always been the type to be absorbed in his work, and he took the change as a great blessing.

Yet of all the things he could have kept with him, the eccentric fellow's unbreakable habit was to soothe a crick in his neck. It was so ridiculous that Agrippina had once told him that surely there was *something* closer to the heart after a century as a mensch. The experimental report she'd secretly been compiling had gone to waste; the results didn't mean anything with such an odd primary source.

And here she'd gone out of her way to prepare for the worst-case scenario: the possibility that the gap between his death and resurrection could have caused him to run wild in a fit of insanity.

Well, in any case, she was fine with how things had gone. Her backup plan to capture and assuage him had taken a tremendous amount of work to set up, but it wasn't that she *wanted* to test it; she'd only thought it up as a failsafe.

Ah, but wait—had she managed to soothe his tempestuous soul, she would surely have held the edge in their relationship forevermore. After years and years of training her brain to fantasize about what-ifs at the end of a story, Agrippina had at last begun to apply the thought process to her own life.

"Not bad..."

"Hm?"

A wayward comment slipped out from the bog of her imagination, and Erich looked up from his intricate arcane essay.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I simply thought the book I finished wasn’t too bad.”

“Wow, rare to see you voice your opinion like that. Let me see it later.”

“Mm. Then I’ll put it somewhere easy to find.”

Coolly covering up her mishap, Agrippina evaded any further prodding.

The hypothetical was an interesting thought experiment. After all, she still remembered the intensity of Erich’s rage when she’d first propped him up as a noble. His eyes had burned with enmity like that of an orphan staring down their parents’ killer.

The moment his glare burned brightest had come on the day of their wedding. Dressed up in lavish regalia of her own choice, he’d looked like the prince of a timeworn saga. Yet while his outward appearance was dashing enough to make Lady Leizniz nearly fade out of reality, the undiluted malice in his gaze was scorched into Agrippina’s recollection.

So much had happened over the course of their long history; the memories lived on in her unforgetting mind with striking detail, perfectly immortalizing those fierce eyes. But look at him now: his kitten-blue eyes had brightened to an icier hue, and the pupils within were fixed carelessly on a book.

Here they were, slovenly laying on a couch with their legs intertwined. Even the old knife he’d perennially carried in life—which, as she recalled, had gone to their eldest daughter after a massive fight between the children—was nowhere to be found.

If she struck now, she could kill him; it would still be a struggle, and there was great risk he’d bring her down as well, but his guard was low enough to die.

But that went both ways.

Agrippina had removed all the accessories she wore to boost her mana and bolster her spells. The only ornament on her person was a dragonscale barrette her husband had gotten for her—how in the world had he managed to find the scales when he was nearly sixty, she still wondered—to celebrate their forty-third anniversary.

If Erich struck now, when she was fully relaxed, the best she could hope to do was take him down with her.

“Yes, this is much better.”

Mumbling to herself in an inaudible tone, Agrippina reached for her next book with an Unseen Hand. The fantasy had been entertaining, but the best it could ever be was “not bad.” Given the choice between that and what she had now, she would choose this life

every time.

The obnoxious stream of suitors trying to take his place was gone; her talented husband once again handled all the tedious paperwork; and, aside from the occasional complaint of mass destruction, her children had become much easier to handle.

Peace was easier to come by now. Research was fun in its own right, but nothing could beat the joy of cozying up with a book in hand.

So I'm sure that this is how it was meant to be.

Cracking open a new cover with a smile, she quietly strengthened the barrier enveloping the room. As far as she was concerned, every extra moment they went undisturbed was one well spent.

And so, despite the numerous attempts made to interrupt them, the couple went on to read until just before the following social season. They say that when the husband saw the mountain of work that awaited him, his ghastly face went paler than death itself.

[Tips] Nobles wield power in direct proportion to their responsibilities.





Afterword

Thank you. First to my grandmother, whom I will never stop missing. Next to my editor, who accepts my slow progress with good humor but stern encouragement. Then to Lansane, for realizing my every fantasy, no matter how outlandish. Most of all, a thank you to everyone who has been kind enough to read my work.

Your support is what has allowed me to continue publication without issue—er, well... I mean, I suppose this release proves things are going smoothly enough, and that fact brings me untold joy.

That said, I have once again produced a moderately dense work of writing by greatly magnifying a set of events the web novel glossed right over. I'd let myself indulge then by hinting that Agrippina had come across some powerful enemies; now, she finally gets a chance to play her part as a proper character. For you online readers, you may be excited to see names put to faces!

This volume is packed with enough new material to leave longtime readers scratching their heads. To tell the truth, my secret plan is to continue on this course until the big names above the editorial team cave in and green light a full anthology of freshly thought-up Hendersons. While that scheme has yet to bear fruit, another of my wildest dreams has come true.

I'm sure that the little advertisement on the physical book band already has many of you excited. Yes, that's right: I've finally reached one of the summits any Narou author can hope to surmount. This series is getting a manga!

With awards from Ichijinsha under their Game/Anime Comics section and the Special Shonen Ace Prize from Kadokawa's manga newcomers awards, the artist in charge will be Uchida Temo (Twitter ID: @utida_temo). I am incredibly happy to have a fellow Keeper on the project, and with the inclusion of a very on-theme creature in this very volume, I can only assume the gods watching over us—perhaps of the cephalopod variety—have arranged for this selection.

Now that I have a manga in the works and five whole volumes—ignore that there are technically six books—published, I figure they'll bump me up from a “self-proclaimed author” to the real deal if I ever do anything to get myself on the news.

...I don't plan on it, mind you, but it's good to be safe.

All jokes aside, my work is being *turned into a manga*. I've seen

comments to the effect of, “This series would be too much work,” “Seems like a hassle to include all the details of the setting,” or, “Having to draw in demihumans for background characters would be pure hell.” Admittedly, some such gripes were of my own making—which was why I’d considered it a pipe dream—but after two years of publication it’s finally happened. I hope you’ll continue to watch the little munchkin run wild when he visits a different medium.

Now then, I don’t intend to pack this whole afterword with announcements; let me touch on the main text to the extent I can without spoilers. Whether because of authorial mistakes or ingenuity in hindsight, any web novelist can attest: work on a series for long enough, and even the most elaborate of plots will turn up with holes somewhere. From forgetting to show how Celia could turn into a mensch to failing to give Agrippina a chance to show her true power, many were the occasions upon which I’d thought to myself, *Oh, I should’ve included that*.

Yet even with the ease of editing an online work, revisions alone do not drive the story and thus risk boring the audience. Worse still, changes can actively confuse loyal readers; it’s simply impossible to prioritize amendments over new material. Truthfully, the state of the web novel is something that leaves a good deal of regret in my heart, but I’ve come too far to turn back now.

In light of this, I am taking full liberty to do whatever I please with the printed version. I’ve added in new characters just because I felt like it, and dreamt up payoffs for foreshadowing I’d missed my chance to capitalize on the first time. Hints on the cursed nature of Agrippina’s eye were first dropped in the first canto of volume four; I’m very pleased that I finally have the chance to unveil what mysteries it holds in the course of furthering the main plot.

Another major victory of mine is that I was able to add scenes of Erich enjoying his time with Mika and Celia. The push for forward progress in the web novel meant that he’d turned fifteen and left the capital in the blink of an eye, but I didn’t want these relationships to boil down to, “Hi! We’re friends now! Bye!” Seeing how characters interact as their bonds deepen is one of the joys of storytelling—in both novels *and* in tangential conversations shared in the downtime of a tabletop campaign.

If you, the reader, are so kind as to muster enough support for a seventh book, I will endeavor to once more fill it with new material. Next, I’d like to expand on all of Erich’s run-ins with trouble as he makes his way home.

Web readers may recall those one-shot adventures that were glossed over in a handful of words. You may even have had some rather choice words about how tersely they were described—you were

right, and now I'd like to do them justice. The many comments asking for more details than a mere recollection of the journey have given me the push to let my own wants take the wheel.

On another note, despite the infamous disease's continued ill effects on the world, I have good news to share: recently, I had the opportunity to partake in my beloved tabletop games not once, but twice! Fueled by the fun I had, I gave it my very best to write in a way that might make you wish to do the same. Once the curtains fall on this period of history, I can only hope that my work can become someone's reason to pick up a rule book.

With all that said, I'd like to send this afterword off with a prayer that you might enjoy my rambling scribbles again in the future. Please take care of yourself, and may we meet again in the Trialist Empire of Rhine.

[Tips] The author uploads side stories and world-building details to @Schuld3157 on Twitter as “extra replays” and “rule book fragments.”



Multi-
armpit
fetish

Gaga



Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World

Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson

5

Henderson Scale

The “Henderson” referenced in the subtitle is Old Man Henderson, a Western tabletop legend.

Famed for overcoming a blood-thirsty GM to miraculously tie up the story he appears in, he has since become a measuring stick for how derailed a campaign can get.

Author
Schuld
Illustrator
Lansane



“Will you please
take the lead?”

Ursula

“Of course.”

Captivating,
enchanting, and resolute,
her vermillion eyes drooped
into a smile.

Erich



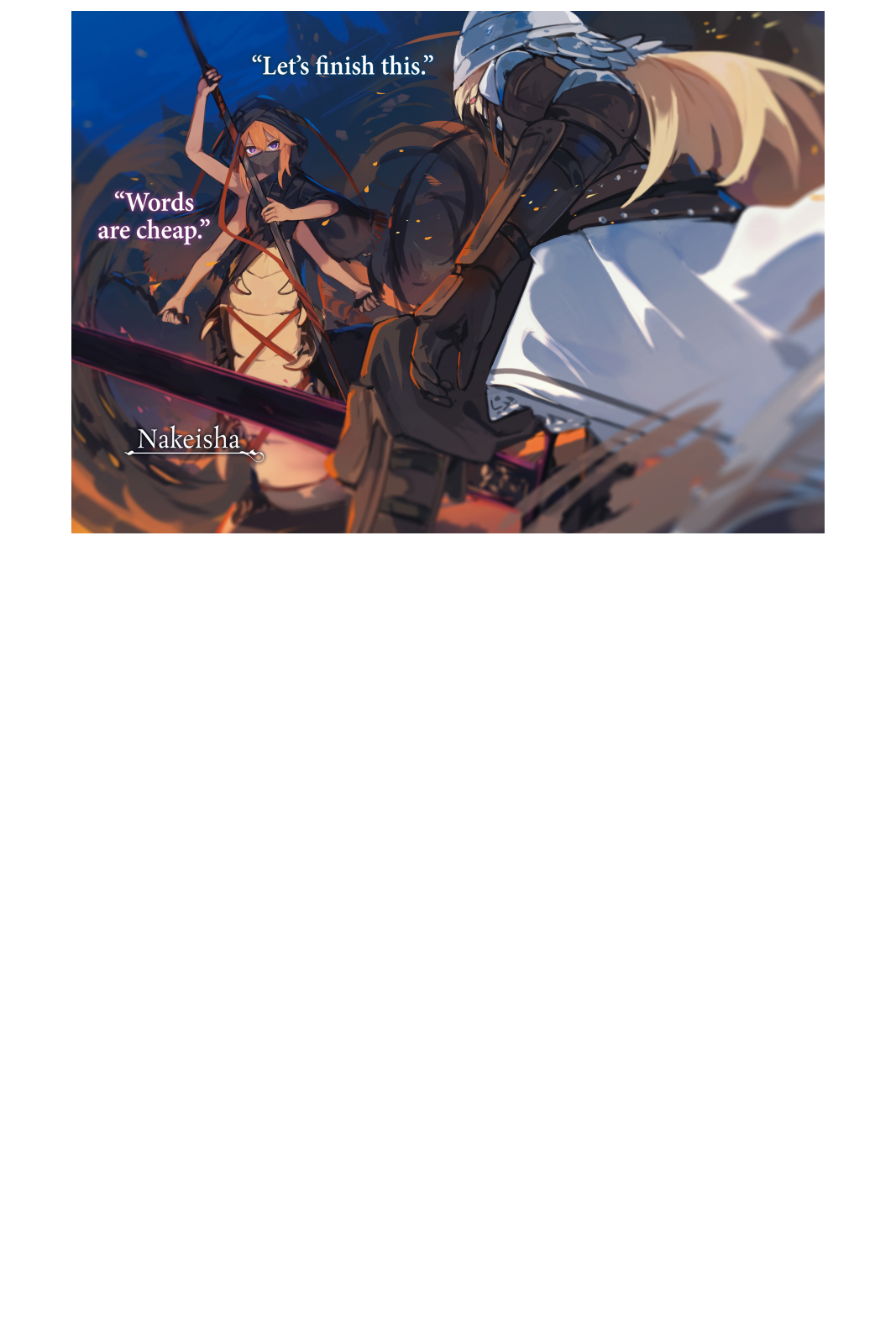
Leizniz

“From all
that you’ve said,
I’m positively sure
that you’ll be
overjoyed to
see this,
my darling
disciple.”

I’ve been had!

Agrippina immediately
pieced together the puzzle that
had been put into place
without her knowing,
and her face drained
of all color.

Agrippina



“Let’s finish this.”

“Words
are cheap.”

Nakeisha

CHARACTER

Name

Agrippina

Agrippina du Stahl oder von Ubiorum*

*Roughly twenty middle names omitted.

Race

Methuselah

Position

Enemy/Connection

Specialties

[REDACTED]

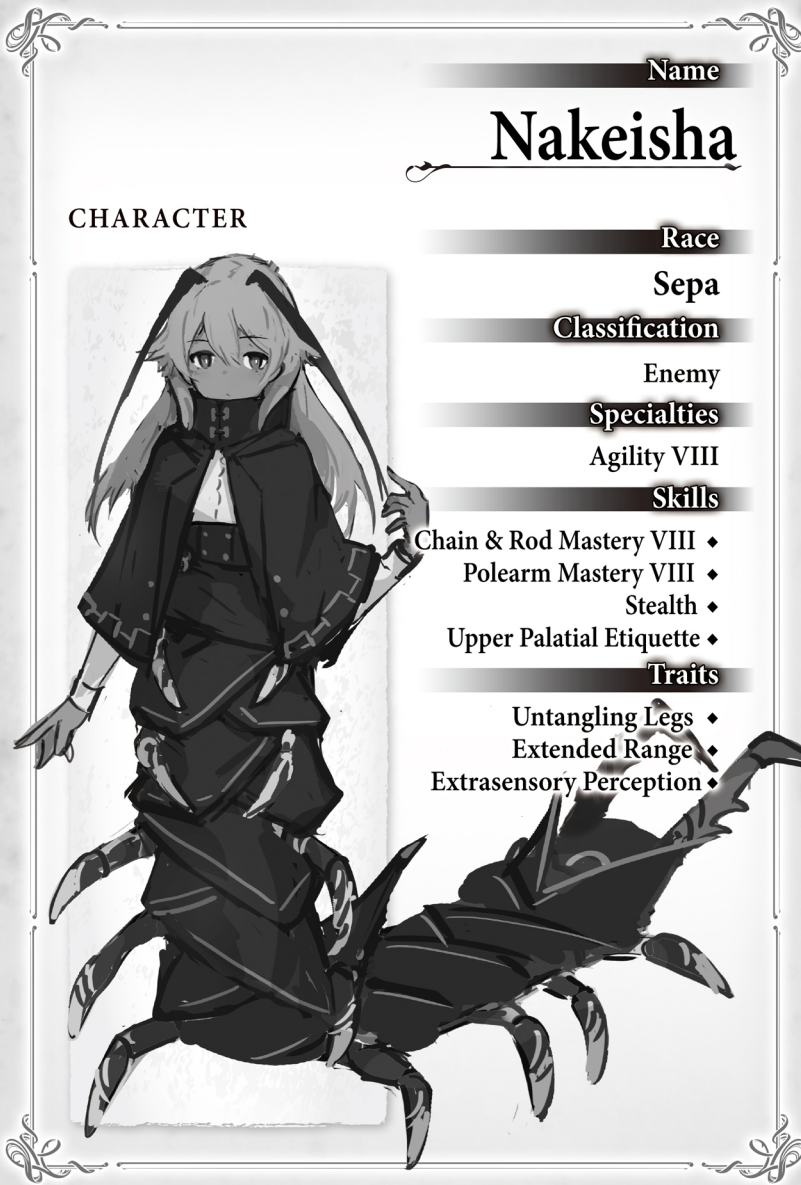
Skills

- ◆ [REDACTED] Magic
- ◆ [REDACTED]
- ◆ [REDACTED]

Traits

- ◆ Tireless Fatigue
- ◆ She Who Sees None
Yet Seeks All
- ◆ [REDACTED]





Name

Nakeisha

CHARACTER

Race

Sepa

Classification

Enemy

Specialties

Agility VIII

Skills

Chain & Rod Mastery VIII ♦

Polearm Mastery VIII ♦

Stealth ♦

Upper Palatial Etiquette ♦

Traits

Untangling Legs ♦

Extended Range ♦

Extrasensory Perception ♦

Bonus Short Stories

Amethyst Ember

Since time immemorial, the dark has been the best soil for the seeds of conspiracy; yet even so, this particular set of criminal minds was pushing the boundaries of banality.

A ways off from the nearest village, three shady characters huddled together in a decaying hunter's shack with their faces all but glued together. Not only had they forsaken any article of clothing or accessory that might point to their identities, but their attire had been pared down to the simplest basics: so plain and unremarkable were they that it would be difficult for an eyewitness to recall even the simplest feature. They'd obscured their faces with mud and ink, going so far as to stuff cotton in their mouths to change the contour of their jawlines.

In the middle of these disguised ne'er-do-wells was a table, and on it, a single map. It depicted the finer details of some manor, and a meticulous step-by-step plan had been scribbled onto it in code; whatever it meant, it was certainly no righteous affair.

"Everything is according to plan."

"Indeed. We'll bring that dirty schemer down."

"It's finally time to avenge our lord."

At long last, the trio was satisfied with their preparations. Each took one last look at their own role in the plot as they spat out insults formed from the resentment that stewed within.

"Hm?"

As one began to roll up the map and another started stashing their coins, the last glanced outside. When the last lord passed away, his successor had displayed such little interest in the hunt that this shack had been abandoned; there wasn't so much as a groundskeeper assigned to maintain it. Furthermore, not even an experienced huntsman would dare prowl the forest depths when the Night Goddess hid Herself in a blanket of clouds—the odds of anyone coming upon them were slim.

Yet the lookout had heard a sound: not the rustling of windswept branches nor the happy prance of a fox freed from the danger of a huntsman's bow, but of a branch snapping under somebody's foot.

At once, the group snapped to attention, each reaching for their weapon as they eyed the door. One produced a longsword hidden in

their mantle; another readied a set of throwing daggers; the last drew a wand. The swordsman took the first step: silently, they crept to the front door. But half an instant before he could burst through, their foe appeared—not from the door, but from the dilapidated ceiling full of holes.

A massive frame came crashing down, smashing the table along with the map and lantern resting on it. But just before the sole source of light was extinguished, the three caught a glimpse of a centipede beyond proportion. They were up against a demihuman from the south, a rarity in these parts—a sepa.

The fleeting moment of light gave way to as many screams as there were people. A flick of her enormous trunk was enough to send them flying; though her upper body was less hulking, her deft arms sufficed to subjugate the schemers.

The trio had experience as spies and assassins, and the skills to back it up. Indeed, their lord had placed full faith in their plan. Alas, while they were no mere hoodlums, the intruder's ability was great enough to trample over theirs with ease. They had been so focused on preparing for their offensive that the sneak attack from an enemy who outclassed them had come as a total surprise.

“Augh! Urgh... You...rotten...”

Built like a solid log, her thrashing trunk slammed one against the wall, knocking them out cold; the short iron club in her right hand clobbered the second unconscious. She grabbed the final mage by the neck with her free hand, hoisting them into the air such that their feet just barely cleared the ground.

Still, the mage kicked and squirmed as they tried to charge up a spell; yet the sepa's *second* left hand quickly snatched away the wand, leaving the caster's mana swirling within their body in circles. The final schemer glared defiantly at the hooded assassin for a time, but eventually ran out of breath and lost consciousness.

All that remained was a lone, bored sepa and her prey. Despite the one-on-three odds, the poor fools had failed in the worst way possible: they'd been taken alive.

“I'm done.”

The agent's quiet report was made into an arcane transceiver, and her accomplices, who'd drawn the trio's attention from beyond the door, came inside. They quickly relieved the schemers of any means of self-silencing, bound them up as tightly as possible, and tossed them in a sack to be carried off.

“A job well done, my lady.”

“There was hardly anything to do here, let alone do well.”

“Please, you mustn't be so modest.”

After sidestepping her subordinate's praise, the sepa nonchalantly

brushed off the wood chips from the shattered table and left the room. Truth be told, she didn't know how she was meant to respond. This hadn't posed any challenge, and the whole thing had ended in an instant. Not only had they fallen for the oldest trick in the book, but they hadn't even managed a single counterattack before she'd disarmed them; at this rate, she'd end the night without so much as breaking a sweat.

As per usual, her work bored her.

How long would it be? How many more lightless nights must she spend before a foe would truly set her heart aflutter?

With a heavy sigh, the assassin looked up at the moon. Waned into a thin crescent, its light was weak and offered no answer as it gleamed off her amethyst eyes.

Glowing embers of battle burned on in her heart as she slunk into the night with the rest of her peers. But the cinders remained lit, and she continued to ask: *When, oh when, will I find a worthy opponent?*

[Tips] Among the nobility, it is not uncommon to see entire clans employed for the purpose of reconnaissance or assassination. These families invariably draw blood from creatures particularly suited for their given tasks, and their generational employment is often contingent on that fact.

The ambitions of man spiral together to form the kaleidoscopic magnum opus that is society—at least, such was the view of one fellow who had dedicated the whole of his eternal existence to seeing that work of art through.

Yet some things were beyond even his understanding: take, for example, his daughter.

“Do you like it? Wit have had all your favorite dishes prepared tonight.”

“Thank you, Marquis Donnersmarck. I'm very pleased.”

“Oh, please. Wit have sent away all the help and the barriers are rigidly fixed. Won't you stop being so distant?”

Having been born before the foundation of the Trialist Empire itself, the marquis had a long list of descendants unthinkable for any other methuselah. The root of his promiscuity was his commitment to machinations; marital diplomacy was one of the key tools that made his plots tick. Where others of his ilk tweaked their minds with magic to sate their urges, he made it a point to produce children in his own image. He had married and remarried—it was perfectly socially acceptable for an immortal to take on a new spouse if their mortal companion passed on—to the point that other methuselah questioned whether he was truly one of theirs.

On top of that, he'd adopted just as many children as he'd fathered. Thanks to these efforts combined, he'd maneuvered himself into technically being related to half of the seven electorate houses...but still couldn't figure out how to deal with his young daughter.

The problem had only been exacerbated as of late, seeing as she'd made her rather...*impassioned* proclivities known.

Nakeisha was the daughter of one Asimah: the marquis had fallen for the former agent's charming personality and had taken her as a mistress many years ago. Being the child of one of his favorites, he'd taken great care to raise the girl with love; yet the barrier between methuselah and sepa was hard to reconcile.

As they ate supper together at a private medical retreat, he noticed that she continued to cut her food into small pieces to eat without letting her mouth move. Even out of the public eye, it was hard to get a read on her permanent poker face. Her beautiful features were so remarkably stoic that it was hard to call any characteristic truly distinctive; with how steadfast her gaze was, it was easy to feel like the marquis was talking to a masterfully crafted statue.

For a time, the father let his daughter enjoy her favorite foods in silence. Eventually, though, his curiosity caught up to him; unable to let his concerns fester, he asked a question that had previously produced an incomprehensible response.

"By the way," the marquis began, "about that blond servant boy. He...nearly killed you, yes? Why are you so fond of him, then?"

The girl's steady hands stopped, her knife and fork freezing midair. Two amethyst gems stared straight back into her father's ashen eyes, and his gaze faltered. Any of his political opponents would have been shocked to see Marquis Donnersmarck make such a blunder, but the peculiarity of his daughter's previous answer stuck fast to his mind.

"Are you aware of how centipedes mate?"

"Huh? Centipedes?"

"Yes. First, the male produces a capsule of sperm which he hands to the female. From there, the female uses the package to fertilize her own eggs, forgoing the need for copulation."

The marquis was on the cusp of being a proper father and warning her not to use such unladylike language without reserve, but the girl's curt explanation left him no room to cut in.

"Our lineage can be traced back to a rare strand of particularly aggressive centipedes, and yet we possess reproductive organs here, in our torsos."

"W-Wit don't see any need for you to expound on the details."

"Ah, apologies. I forgot for a moment that you would already

know as much, Marquis.”

Despite all the years under his belt, this shut the methuselah up at once; the reminder that he'd (obviously) lain in bed with the girl's mother even brought him to blush. Had he been two hundred years younger, perhaps he would've made a serious ass of himself as younger boys are wont to do.

“This is speculation on my part, but I suspect that our natural preference for independent action makes us seek company that can match our aggression.”

For sepa, “intimacy” was not so harmonious a word as a humanfolk might understand it. Sex was less a union and more a clash, closer to wrestling or even life-or-death combat than sweet cuddling.

The image of his mistress naturally appeared in the back of Marquis Donnersmarck's mind, but she was a gorgeous and modest woman utterly divorced from the concepts of which their daughter spoke. Yet in truth, this was a product of the woman's discernment; she had both the wits and wherewithal to tailor her style to the whims of her partner.

After all, such technique came with the territory: no covert operative could extract sensitive information if they forced their instinctual tastes on a potential informant.

“I'm told grabbing collars, baring fangs, and full-on fistfights are mere foreplay for many couples.”

“H-How...passionate. Say, where did you learn all this, anyhow?”

“There are many men in our organization, and such conversations between them are hardly difficult to come by.”

Although the marquis was by no means an overprotective parent, he made a mental note to order the clan elder to keep his men in line the next time they met.

“At any rate,” Nakeisha went on, “that is simply the burden we are saddled with. A partner who can take me at my full force, someone with the strength to beat me into submission? That appeals to me on some deeply instinctual level.”

As she spoke, the girl's mind wandered to a sweet fantasy—at least, by sepa standards. If only she could yank those cold, kitten-like eyes close; if only he would do the same, locking their gazes at point-blank range. If only she could sink her fangs into his neck, leaving behind a trademark sepa bite mark with the faint effects of her toxins running through his veins. But then he'd counter. He'd punch her—no, stab her—in the stomach; oh, how lovely.

They would push and be pushed, conquer and be conquered. From there, their struggle would only escalate, and in the end, she would carefully sever his neck so as not to cut his pretty hair, and gently

bring his lips up to her own. Or perhaps his strike would land first, and it would be her decapitated head resting on his pillowy lap, gently stroked as she drew her last.

Suddenly, the fresh scars on her arm began to tingle, and she held herself tight to contain the emotion swelling up in her heart. Even then, she couldn't contain herself: the mandibles she'd so carefully hidden away while eating her meal slipped out and began to chitter.

"Marquis Donnersmarck, are you aware that I am one of the top performers in our family?"

"Wit am. Reports of your talent come my way frequently, and your results speak for themselves. Wit can see why your grandfather considers you the jewel of your clan."

"As a result, none of the boys have ever been a match for me." After a pause, she added, "I would simply break them, should I let myself."

The methuselah was awestruck at the unbridgeable rift between their perspectives. Apparently, the undying were not the only ones burdened with afflictions of habit at birth. Or perhaps, he thought to himself, every way of life carried its own inclinations and intuitions incomprehensible to those who did not share them.

"But if it were him, he would not shatter under my fist. He would show me the brink of ruin. I'm sure that a true bout with him would be an unforgettable memory... And on top of that, our child would certainly be stronger than any other."

"Wit, uh...see."

Dig deeper in the pursuit of knowledge, and ye shall find yourself in depths too profound to comprehend; for once in his life, Marquis Donnersmarck could empathize with the struggles of the magia he so often employed as pawns. In the end, the father's concerns were no closer to being resolved, only growing more severe.

[Tips] Some types of demihumans are said to have gained the ability to birth live young after leaving their ancestral roots behind. However, this commonly leads to unconscious tension with the instincts they inherit from their animalistic predecessors, making it difficult for them to adjust to societal expectations.

Manservant at the College's Reception Desk

The Imperial College of Magic championed the lofty goal of venturing into the unknowable depths of all there was to know, and offered an environment for seekers of knowledge to hone their crafts. Yet, being an institution put together by humans, it had its fair share

of problems. Jealousy, grudges, bullying—like war, these petty issues were simply ingrained in what made people people.

One young student found himself waiting in the lobby for the College's job bulletin to be restocked with requests. He was the son of a wealthy merchant, so he wasn't here to earn his keep; his only aim was to get some practical experience and sell his name among the professors and researchers putting out the requests.

In the same vein, a handful of well-to-do boys and girls who knew nothing of want were waiting nearby too. Plenty of professors placed great emphasis on how many of these bulletin tasks a student completed, and completing the right listings could lead to long-standing connections with those above.

As he leisurely waited for the board to be restocked, another boy caught his eye, appearing unannounced by the sound of footsteps. The newcomer's carefully braided golden hair naturally drew stares: after all, this indentured servant occupied a unique position here at the College. Not only did he serve an accomplished magus who'd been gone for fieldwork for decades, but he was the personal pet of Dean Leizniz, leader of one of the Five Great Pillars.

His name was Erich...or was it Eric? Regardless, it seemed like he had business at the reception desk: he quietly lined up to wait for his turn carrying a massive stack of papers. It was this humility and his understanding of his place on the social ladder that had let him dodge public scrutiny despite his unique circumstances.

Again, it *had been* enough. No longer was that the case.

As his employer began to garner attention, the boy had slowly become the target of others' ire. Though the student hadn't heard anything of substance, nasty rumors that being his lord's most trusted retainer—allowed free passage in and out of her laboratory, at that—had gotten to his head were making the rounds. By the young magus-in-training's estimate, the nobles around their age weren't exactly pleased to see the boy's master climb the social ladder in leaps and bounds.

In fairness, the majority of aristocrats that enrolled were third or fourth sons who hoped to honor their families by winning a bureaucratic position at some point in the future. As privileged as they were, they weren't *that* privileged, and seeing someone else bestowed the titles they so coveted was sure to fan the flames of their envy.

That said, mere students had no hope of standing up against a soon-to-be professor and count. Thus, the natural course of action was for them to take out their anger on someone below them: the unenrolled manservant she dragged along everywhere.

The young student saw a clique of noble children snicker at the poor servant and pull out their wands; they were going to do

something stupid. Honestly, he could hardly believe that the so-called proud nobility of the Empire would stoop low enough to use magic in service of their own petty gratification.

His view hidden by the mountain of papers in hand, the servant was a sitting duck for the Unseen Hand creeping toward his feet. Worse still, the pranksters had loosened the cap off the ink bottle of the girl next to him—a *count's daughter*, no less—to set up a dastardly trick as old as time. Their foolery was no better than that of the unwashed brats of the low quarter; seeing them was a good reminder that noble birth alone was not enough to foster noble character.

But then again, the student thought, ashamed, he wasn't really any better. Here he was, watching without so much as offering a warning. But his family wasn't strong enough to antagonize the upper classes, and he couldn't justify bringing his master's name up willy-nilly. Unfortunately, he couldn't bring himself to throw away his own future for someone else's sake.

Usually, this would be where the helpless servant is blamed for causing a scene, ruins his master's paperwork with ink, and is put in serious trouble for bothering a count's daughter—but not a single one of those timeworn story beats unfolded as they normally would. The boy hopped over the invisible appendage sweeping at his feet without even a hint of showmanship.

As an onlooker, the young student was impressed. The servant went on to dodge a second, then a third attack, so this clearly was no coincidence; he even kicked away the fourth attempt that had tried to grab his ankles. He could *see*.

On top of that, when one of the Hands went wide and slammed into the highborn girl beside him, he managed to break her fall with good grace. Throwing his stack of papers high into the air, he first caught her ink bottle before the cap could come loose; then, he used his free hand to gingerly catch the girl as she careened backward. Finally, the heap of papers came back down on a precise, gentle arc that he snagged between his elbow and shoulder with his bottle-holding arm.

His reaction speed, decision-making, and dexterity were all top notch.

"Please excuse me for making contact without asking. Are you all right?"

"U-Um, yes. Thank you."

Having just been spared the embarrassment of toppling over in a public place, the count's daughter seemed confused by the sudden turn of events—but her eyes were positively glowing. This, too, was a development as old as time.

In the end, the mean-spirited trick had turned out in the

manservant's favor. As the saying went, those who play with pits and snares have all the means to hang themselves. The student supposed that the pranksters hadn't suffered any consequences in this case, but seeing their victim turn into a hero was surely punishment enough.

More to the point, the magus-in-training wondered to himself who the servant-boy was with equal parts awe and fear. He was currently studying to be a polemurge, and his familiarity with martial arts meant he could properly gauge how ridiculous the feat he'd just witnessed was.

His interest had already been piqued when noticing the steadiness of the boy's gait, but his sheer stability when breaking the girl's fall—a quite violent one—solidified the student's opinion that the boy was someone special. The fundamentals that allowed for this accomplishment could only come from long hours of training. On top of that, his reactions and decisions had been honed enough to make full use of his trained body; what was more, he was so observant that he'd noticed the faint trace of a minor spell.

No mere servant or retainer could do *all* of that. For his part, the student could have avoided the Hands, protected the papers, *or* saved the girl—if it were just one, he was confident he could've pulled it off. But to do all three without the help of at least a minor cantrip was well beyond his level.

The servant-boy was decidedly abnormal: menial labor would never lead someone to carry themselves like him. From the polemurge-hopeful's perspective, the boy, with his meticulous commitment to perfect form, was the spitting image of a warrior.

How did those innocent, kitten-like eyes see the world? the student wondered. From how the servant and young lady had been positioned, she should've been perfectly in his blind spot.

A tangential epiphany suddenly struck the student: those numbskulled nobles had managed to earn a terrifying enemy in their quest for amusement. He offered up a silent prayer for their tragic futures, but also lamented his own inaction. Had he spoken up, he might've made an equally terrifying ally today.

Alas, more words of wisdom came to haunt him: he who has not the courage to stand for justice shall reap not its rewards.

[Tips] Being a house of learning composed of many individuals, the College cannot entirely avoid the darker sides of human interaction. Further, it must always be remembered that even the “students” of the institution are better versed in the art of violence than the disciples of any other craft.

On the Brink, the Wraith Seeks Respite

Though I lived in a world where the turn of phrase “pale as death” was too close to reality to be spoken, the wraith’s lack of vigor was that of someone beyond the grave.

“Uh, um, L-Lady Leizniz? Forgive my candor, but are you okay?”

“I’m fiine, heh. Yes, oh so very fine... I’m immortal, after all—undead! The circumstances would have to be *quite* extreme to tire me out.”

The dean’s laugh was utterly lacking in vitality. I could have sworn that she wasn’t always this transparent. The outline that denoted where she ended and the rest of the world began was wispier than usual, and the way she swayed with every movement reminded me of a flickering candle. Frankly, her fragility was entirely unfitting for a woman who was both a one-magus army capable of freezing reality itself and the living embodiment of death conquered.

I couldn’t begin to imagine what sort of terrible fate must have befallen her to derail the merry eccentric from her usual monomaniacal zeal in the realm of fashion. Yet while the details remained unclear, it was plain to see that my equally terrifying employer was somehow to blame; I figured an apology was the least I could offer.

“I’m very sorry for all the trouble the madam has caused you.”

“Aww, there’s nothing you need to apologize for, Erich. After all, this is just a part of my duties as the dean of our cadre and as her presiding professor...”

She trailed off, no doubt in order to leave the words “...or else I’d kill that presumptuous brat” unsaid. Judging from her demeanor, Lady Leizniz legitimately seemed close to her breaking point. Here was a wraith who did not tire or hunger; what in the world could that scoundrel have done to drive her into this corner?

“More importantly,” Lady Leizniz said with a clap that slightly, but suddenly, brightened her mood, “let us begin putting together your outfit! Ooh, what shall we have you wear this time?”

To explain how I’d gotten here, I’d found myself in need of a new set of servile formalwear with everything going on around me. The order had come directly from imperial diplomats, who’d supplied me with raw materials and a production stipend to make sure I was dressed in a way that wouldn’t embarrass everyone around me—that is to say, I was meant to wear something *really* fancy.

Naturally, I couldn’t exactly walk into my local tailor shop to have them make me a high-class suit; I’d swallowed my hesitance and asked the closest expert I knew for help.

Picking my words as charitably as I possibly could, Lady Leizniz was still best described as an utter pervert—placing long, frilly gloves and garter belts on a little girl was *not worthy of comment*; let’s leave it

at that—but I couldn't deny that she had a sixth sense when it came to couture. Her knowledge of trends in high society was encyclopedic, and the seamstresses in her employ were fit to sew for kings and queens; as far as the capital went, she was unmistakably one of the foremost authorities in the field.

Figuring it was best to leave every man to his trade, I'd been trying to think of a way to ask for her help when I'd received an invitation that preempted me: she'd seen through my need for a wardrobe update upon hearing that I'd be visiting the palace, and I was more than willing to take her up on her offer.

"We'll need to make sure it's up to the rigid formality of a traditional design, but it would be such a waste not to include a few modern touch-ups," she muttered to herself. "Ruffs are in vogue amongst the gentry, but we'll need to go back a few seasons for a servant's uniform..."

Being the sort of pompous establishment to turn away general customers, this shop lacked a convenient catalog full of ready-to-order designs, but I had to admit, the sheer quantity of premade display pieces littering the mannequins around the store was nothing short of amazing. Now on the brink of losing herself in more ways than one, the wraith danced through the air every time one of the seamstresses brought out another garment for me to test.

"Lady Leizniz, we *must* give him a tie! The tie is simply a necessity in this day and age! I know the trend comes from a satellite state, but believe me—it is the peak of style!"

"No, that won't do—it's too sleek. Boys like him are best in something more splendiferous, more...*fluffy*."

"Then a bow tie! What say you to that, my lady?!"

But, well, if I could just voice one small complaint, it was decidedly odd that the tailors were pushing their own tastes instead of simply waiting for the commissioner to lay out their specifications. I supposed that I ought to expect as much from the wraith's thralls—okay, they were probably just employed normally, but I thought the term fit better—but I still had the right to grumble.

"Let me think. The crown gave him a wonderful roll of silk, and Erich is best in darker colors, so maybe we can start by dyeing it a glossy black. Then, we can pair it with a white shirt with a tie, a vest, and..."

Although her complexion had not improved, her expression was one of rapture. To be honest, the sight of her floating around mumbling to herself was so disturbing that I would've felt more comfortable in the presence of a ghost from a Japanese horror film. At least then I could've exorcized her with a magic item or something; that would never work on the dean.

Oh, wait. I forgot about my own request.

“Excuse me, Lady Leizniz. I know this might be a bit of a hassle, but I’m slated to serve as an official bodyguard as well. Do you think you could prepare a belt for me to attach my sword—”

“A sword?!” Her reaction was so over the top that I legitimately jumped back. “Ah, how wonderful! You’ll need a mantle to cover it so you won’t look so intimidating—something courteous to wear in the palace! Ooh, I just *love* those sorts of capes!”

“My lady! *My lady!* What do you think about a *half* mantle?! Just imagine it: an innocent young boy in a clean, striking outfit. The contrast gives me shivers!”

“If we’re going to pair it with a tie, then let’s drape it over one shoulder! He’ll look just like a royal guard from one of the satellite states, and that uniform nearly stopped my heart when I first saw it!”

“I adore that idea—that’s the one! Oh, oh, whatever shall we use for the materials? I think a leather with a glossy finish would look lovely!”

Squealing over the contrast of an outfit for a child—well, a child in physique, at least—was the height of degeneracy, and the atmosphere was toxic to someone as normal as me. Though, judging from how she was spiraling around in a helical pattern with her hands on her cheeks, it seemed the air tasted just fine to Lady Leizniz.

It seemed I was locked into being dressed up in keeping with her fetishes to the extent the law would allow. I’d hoped the need for formality would do anything at all to rein in her proclivities, but alas, my hopes were thoroughly dashed.

[Tips] Current Rhinian style is to take traditional fits and modernize them by slimming them down. There has also been an uptick in influence from the ethnic garb of the desert dwellers to the east, and old-school displays of ostentation like the collar ruff have reemerged as well. But in certain circles, dressing one’s retainers like the guards of the Empire’s satellite states has begun to pick up steam.

Tableful of Happiness

Humming while cooking was something of a habit for my mother in Konigstuhl. The memories of the mother I’d had before her were too hazy to piece together; at most, I could just barely recall that she’d used the embarrassing apron I’d made her as an elementary school project—mention of *that* dragon was enough for those in some circles to understand—for years because she “didn’t want it to go to waste.”

At any rate, the humming had rubbed off on me. I sang the tune

to a heroic saga I'd heard at the Konigstuhl square; though the tale itself was a mess of tropes, the minstrel who'd sung it had been good with his six-stringed lyre, and I'd enjoyed the performance greatly.

The melody of a hero whisking away a young lady from the shackles of high society spilled from my vocal cords as I cut up vegetables with a workplace dagger. I may not have had a proper cooking knife lying around, but anything with a blade would do the trick.

Today's ingredients included the onions that were so pervasive in our continent's western reach, a yam-like root imported from beyond the Southern Sea—they were basically the Southern Continent's version of sticky yams—and a bit of oversalted bacon that I'd found in the bargain bin.

First, I sliced the onions finely. For the root vegetables, I coated my hands in a mystic barrier so the sliminess wouldn't make my skin itch as I peeled the outer skin. Rubbing in a bit of salt, I boiled off the remaining gunk; I wouldn't have been so meticulous had I been cooking for myself, but I wasn't about to serve slippery yams to my *guests*.

Once the vegetables were done, I chucked the bacon into hot water to pull off the excessive salt that had made it so cheap to begin with. Carving off the hardened outer layer of saline meat, I threw those bits back into the brine to stew over into a soup. After all, tossing out meat without extracting all its flavors would just be a tragic waste.

I cut up the rest of the bacon and stir-fried it with the veggies, adding in a few herbs to balance out the flavor, and voilà: I had a plate of German fries on my hand. Sure, I technically didn't have potatoes or peppercorns, but a careful tuning of herbs was enough to get close.

Going back to the soup, I diluted it with a bit more hot water and a few herbs, and stirred in some onions and turnips for good measure. The flavor was still a bit strong, but I figured it'd pair well with black bread.

"Mm... Yeah, that should do it."

Upon taste-testing my product, I could feel my growing body whine that it wanted a little more fat on the tongue; in other words, this was probably just right, nutritionally speaking. I might have let the meat stew had I been on the road, but that would prove to be too oily and salty for someone living in the city. This was probably a good stopping point.

"Okay," I said, plating my dining-room table with Unseen Hands, "sorry to keep you all waiting."

"Wow!" three voices cried at once.

For a mere test run of my Campfire Cooking, Culinary Knowledge, and Portioned Seasoning combo thrown together with whatever cheap ingredients I could find around town, I felt like their unhidden excitement was more than I deserved.

“The onions and bacon smell *amazing*. Boy, have I been craving a good, hearty meal like this.”

“I’m excited to see that the soup is full of turnips. We’ve been serving quite a number of root vegetables at the church recently, and I’ve grown rather fond of them.”

“This looks so yummy! It reminds me of Mother’s cooking!”

Today, I was hosting a little luncheon party. Seeing how Miss Celia hadn’t been able to join us last time, I’d set aside a day of rest in my gods-awful work schedule to soothe my soul with some good company.

Mika’s frugal lifestyle always had his stomach wanting for more, but especially when he was a boy; the giant mound of food put a noticeable twinkle in his eye. Miss Celia seemed so excited for the plain meal that I could almost forget she was noble. And of course, my adorable baby sister was all smiles as the dishes brought her back to our humble countryside home.

Although this sort of thing had originally begun as a way of helping my old chum keep up with his brutal day-to-day, funnily enough, it had transformed more into a time of respite for me. Mika’s daily struggle was still as harsh as ever, mind you, but I was now right there with him when it came to everyday stress.

“All right,” I said, “let’s cut up the bread. How much do you guys want?”

“Whew, you really make sure to pick out the big loaves for us, huh, old pal? In that case, let me oblige: I’ll take a quarter, if you don’t mind.”

“I only need a small slice. I still have my evening duties to see to, and I wouldn’t want to be moving around on a full stomach.”

“Umm, I shall take a fifth, Dear Brother. Black bread is so awfully bloating when I eat it after a long break.”

I was happy to fulfill each of their requests, and once the bread was served, it was time to dig in.

What a joyous moment. Smiling and laughing at the same table, we went back and forth over topics that we all enjoyed. The little chitchat, the suggestions to play ehrengarde after lunch—all of it was precious beyond words.

These were the moments I lived for. No matter how arduous my work was, I could soldier on to enjoy these days again. And when the reaper drew near, this would be what flashed into my mind to wring the last ounce of will out of my heart.

I took a bite of bread and carefully chewed on the happiness before me. Slowly, with great deliberation, I swallowed it down and swore to myself: whatever the future had in store, I would see it through.

[Tips] While imports are restricted only to products that keep well for long periods of time, the Empire is home to much foreign produce.

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Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World: Volume 5
by Schuld

Translated by Mikey N.
Edited by Will Holcomb

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